School of Theology at Claremont
10011453023

Methodist
Historical Society

Southern California-Arizona
Conference

Presented by

Huntington Beach
Methodist Church

29 -

The Library

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT CLAREMONT

WEST FOOTHILL AT COLLEGE AVENUE
CLAREMONT, CALIFORNIA

BX
8346
M5
1854

Methodist
Historical Society
Southern California - Arizona
Conference

TREATISE

ON

CLASS MEETINGS.

BY REV. JOHN MILEY, A. M.

With an Introduction,

BY REV. THOMAS A. MORRIS, D. D.,
ONE OF THE BISHOPS OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH.

"Wherefore, comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do."

Cincinnati:
PUBLISHED BY SWORMSTEDT & POE,
FOR THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, AT THE WESTERN BOOK CONCERN, CORNER OF MAIN AND EIGHTH STREETS.

R. P. THOMPSON, PRINTER.
1854.

Theology Library
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT
40-15502

Entered, according to Act of Congress, in the year 1851,
BY JOHN MILEY,
In the Clerk's Office of the District Court for the District of Ohio.

PREFACE.

METHODISM is spiritual Christianity. She does not reject suitable forms, but holds them as subsidiary to her spirituality. Of all these, class meetings occupy the chief place. They are eminently pertinent and important to experimental and practical religion. It may, therefore, be a matter of some surprise that they have not, long since, commanded the service of some one of the many able pens that have ever been ready for the defense, the support, and commendation of the various parts of our Church economy. I could find no work which proposed a discussion of this subject. How far this treatise will supply this deficiency, must await the decision of those who read it. The plan of discussion pursued is that suggested to my mind by the subject itself. My aim has been to set forth the institution in its own true character as the very best light in which it

PROPERTY OF THEOLOGICAL LIBRARY

could be viewed. The arguments offered in support of the obligation of class meetings, have not been hastily thrown out. They were written, at least in part, more than a year since, and have been very carefully considered. Like some others, I once had doubts of the sufficiency of this obligation; but they have all passed away—I am fully satisfied. I have been the more elaborate on this part, under a persuasion of its chief importance. And if this work shall contribute somewhat to the support of this invaluable institution of our Church, I shall feel that I have increased reasons for gratitude and devotion to God. That it may serve this good purpose is my earnest prayer. JOHN MILEY.

Cincinnati, April, 1851.

CONTENTS.

INTRODUCTION ..... Page 7

CHAPTER I.

THE SOCIAL PRINCIPLE UPON WHICH CLASS MEETINGS ARE INSTITUTED.

The social principle 23
The social principle in religion 27
The social principle in class meetings 31

CHAPTER II.

THE DESIGN OF CLASS MEETINGS.

Origin and primary purpose of class meetings 44
Design of class meetings particularly stated 49
Class meetings not a confessional 57

CHAPTER III.

THE OBLIGATION OF CLASS MEETINGS: FIRST GENERAL ARGUMENT.

Class meetings, as a regulation of our Church, constitute a term of Church membership 71
Principle of the first general argument explained and established: prerogative of the Church in prudential regulations · 75
Application of this prerogative to the case of class meetings ··· 96

CHAPTER IV.

THE OBLIGATION OF CLASS MEETINGS: SECOND GENERAL ARGUMENT. FURTHER ARGUMENTS.

Ground of the second general argument explained and established: design of class meetings 114
Obligation of class meetings securely placed upon the ground of their design 125
Further arguments 133

CHAPTER V.

OBJECTIONS TO CLASS MEETINGS CONSIDERED: PRUDENCE REQUISITE IN EXCLUDING FOR NON-ATTENDANCE.

Objections considered ..... Page 146
Prudence requisite in applying the rule which enjoins exclusion for non-attendance 160

CHAPTER VI.

THE BENEFITS OF CLASS MEETINGS.

Useful training for the young and inexperienced 166
Christian communion and self-examination 170
Preservation from delinquency: reclamation of the delinquent 179
Suitable exercise of Christian graces and talents 184
Relations of class meetings to pastoral and disciplinary offices 190
Relations of class meetings to Methodism 195

CHAPTER VII.

THE MODE OF CONDUCTING CLASS MEETINGS.

Mode of conducting them in view of their design 200
Mode of conducting them in order to the greatest good 208

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DUTIES OF LEADERS AND MEMBERS.

Duties of leaders 214
Duties of members 221

INTRODUCTION.

—

Methodism is a wonderful system, a marvelous example of the power and efficacy of simple truth when owned and blessed of God. Small in its beginning, its progress among all classes of people has far exceeded the expectations of its best friends. In little more than one century it has caused itself to be extensively known, felt, and respected in Europe and America, and partially so in other nations of the earth. All this, too, in humble reliance upon God, it has accomplished by its own inherent energy and heavenly influence, without the pomp of ceremony, the patronage of wealth, or the controlling power of civil legislation. All it asks of the ruling powers of this world is to be let alone, left free to exert its own saving power, and operate on its own principles of truth and righteousness. "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation." The chief glory of Methodism is its spiritual vitality, its saving efficacy, developing itself in the new hearts and reformed lives of its subjects to an

extent that demonstrates the divine sanction of its truth and rich blessing of Heaven upon its practical operations. While millions of souls, gathered from the ranks of Methodism, have been safely housed in heaven, and millions more are on their way to glory, as fruits of its direct operation, it has indirectly imparted new light, energy, and saving influence to all the evangelical Churches of Protestant Christendom, which previously possessed the form, but were well-nigh destitute of the power of godliness, till they lighted their torches at her fires. Such is the influence of Methodism, that, while the votaries of other systems have affected to despise it, they have, in self-defense against its encroachments, though, perhaps, imperceptibly to themselves, adopted more or less of its usages. Who ever heard of traveling home missionaries, anxious seats, or inquiring meetings, till the Methodists waked them up with their itinerancy, mourners' bench, and class meetings? We wish our sister Churches success in the enterprise. It is better, perhaps, to have an imperfect imitation of the excellent originals than to be wholly destitute.

Yet Methodism is not a new Gospel, but the primitive, apostolical system revived, after being smothered for ages under such masses of

forms and superstitious ceremonies, such crude notions of its doctrines and admixture of worldly wisdom, as well-nigh extinguished its vitality. With us, at least, Methodism is Christianity untrammeled; and unadulterated Methodism, as it came from our fathers, is "pure religion." It is peculiar for the clearness and consistency of its doctrines, as well as the simple and forcible manner in which they are usually delivered from the pulpit, without the incumbrance of notes; and, though powerfully resisted at first by ignorance and prejudice, they are now very generally received as true by those who have examined them in the spirit of candor, and compared them with the sacred Scriptures, the only infallible rule of faith. It also teaches and imparts to its subjects an experience of grace according to godliness, sound and evangelical—one that changes the heart, reforms the life, removes the sting of death, and affords an assurance of present acceptance by the direct witness of the Holy Spirit. Its usages are simple and convenient, yet solemn and impressive, so that her public worship and social service may all be performed "decently and in order." Its moral discipline, too, is wholesome, exerting a salutary restraint on all its subjects, and is probably enforced

with more strictness than that of any other system, yet without oppressing any who seek conformity to the precepts of the Gospel. Its prudential regulations are the result of experience, adopted from time to time, as occasion required, and not as speculative theory suggested, and are, therefore, founded in wisdom and attended with much practical good to all who properly observe them. Among the prudential regulations of Methodism, the institution of class meetings is one of the most prominent. Watch-nights and love-feasts, though of less frequent occurrence, are, in their proper place, highly beneficial; but class meeting, coming statedly one day in every week, is of still greater importance to our members. It affords an hour for self-examination, prayer, praise, and religious conversation with our most intimate Christian friends, free from the restraints imposed by a public assembly; for while serious inquirers after salvation are allowed to be present a few times, to inform themselves as to its duties and privileges, without any obligation to become members, all triflers with sacred things are excluded. Here, where only pious friends are presumed to be present, where all would help and none would hinder us in the pursuit of spiritual life, we

can freely talk over our hopes and fears, trials and deliverances, resolutions and prospects in the way to heaven. In a word, we may safely and prudently state our case as it is, whether encouraging or otherwise, and thereby secure the sympathizing prayers, counsels, exhortations, or admonitions of those in whom we have most confidence; and thus the friends of Jesus "edify one another," and that which is lame is healed, and not turned out of the way: Now, they who see no advantage to the professor or seeker of salvation in all this, must know little of the human heart, and still less of experimental and practical godliness, and the Scripture and appropriate means of promoting it. Myriads of souls in heaven, and multitudes still on their way, bless God and his Church, and will forever bless them, for the benefits derived through these nurseries of piety. No system affords so many helps to a godly life, so much aid to holy living, as Methodism, nor yet such numerous checks to lukewarmness or lifeless formality. They who are content with a name to live while they are dead find in her courts no rest for the sole of their feet. There is no room for idlers. They must engage in working out their own salvation with fear and trembling, while God works

in them to will and to do, or they must become weary of reproof, and get out of the way. But to such as inquire seriously what they must do to be saved, Methodism presents all the ordinances and privileges of any other evangelical system, with the important addition of the annual watch meeting, the quarterly love-feast, and the weekly class meeting, all of which are very choice Christian privileges, especially the last named, and are so regarded by such as know them best.

The rules and usages of Methodism may be too stringent to suit the views and feelings of some who are sticklers for liberty or love to be at ease in Zion, but not for the accomplishment of its benevolent purpose to spread Scripture holiness over all lands. It has been occasionally intimated, that if we would dispense with some of our rules and usages, the Methodist Episcopal Church would become the most popular of any in the United States. Among the things objected to by some are, the rule against the use of superfluous ornaments, the usage of holding our peculiar Church meetings, namely, love-feasts and class meetings, with closed doors, and the rule requiring our members to meet in classes for weekly examination into their spiritual progress. It is thought by many

that if these and such like requirements were out of the way, that people would throng the doors of our Church by thousands. Perhaps they would. That is what we are afraid of, and what we aim to prevent; for then persons without piety, without religious principle even, would readily avail themselves of the influence arising from Church membership, because cheap; it would require but little sacrifice of worldly pleasure; there would be but few crosses to bear, or duties to perform. Many would, then, join for the sake of a popular minister, who would not now join the Church for her own sake; but unfortunately they would be little or none the better for it. Such as are in earnest to be saved from sin and to gain heaven on Gospel terms, are content with the Church as it is, and they who are not in earnest are unsuitable to share the privileges of Church members. What would it avail to receive multitudes of people into the Church, half awakened, but slightly penitent, unbelieving and without any fixed purpose to lead new lives, but merely wishing to float with the tide of popular feeling, and to be called by the name of Christ to take away their reproach? The Church is of little use to such members, and they are of no use to it. They are not to

be relied on when the Church needs help; they have no principle of action to hold them in the day of her adversity, and no grace to bind them to her interest. Their religion is like the morning cloud and the early dew that soon pass away. Thus, by reducing the standard of piety and relaxing the obligation of duty to meet popular prejudice, we should burden ourselves with useless lumber, cripple our system, lose our power with God and with men, and defeat our main object—the glory of God in the salvation of souls. To blot out these peculiarities of Methodism, would be like removing a stone from the center of an arch—it would weaken the whole system. We wish such, and only such, to become Methodists as will embrace Methodism for its own intrinsic excellence, and then abide its results through weal and woe. If slight modification of its polity become necessary to meet new circumstances, let it be made from time to time by the proper authority; but let not her distinguishing peculiarities be marred to make peace with the world. We love Methodism as it was, as it is, and as, we trust, it ever will be, in all of its essential features at least. As to the peculiar institution of class meeting, whether we view it in its spiritual, pastoral, disciplinary, busi

ness, or social aspect, it is of vast importance to us. Nothing, indeed, could supply its place, or fill the vacuum which its removal would occasion in the system of Church polity of which it is a distinguishing feature. Settled pastors over single congregations may do without it, but itinerant, interchanging pastors, having charge of numerous flocks, to be visited periodically, in order to perform their pastoral labor, find it indispensable to divide their societies into smaller companies, called classes, according to their respective places of abode, and appoint leaders to look after them in their absence. These weekly meetings are to the Church what schools are to colleges, and military training, by companies, is to an army—indispensable to her prosperity.

That good, religious people of other Churches, and some well-disposed people of no Church, do not like class meeting is readily admitted. What else could be calculated on? How could we expect people to appreciate what they have never tested and do not understand? To place a proper estimate upon class meeting, it must be known, not by the representation of prejudiced or uninformed persons, but practically. But whatever plea may be made for others, we have no excuse on the score of ignorance. We

understand the institution; have proved its great value; and if we willfully neglect to avail ourselves of the privilege it affords, it is because the light in us has become darkness; and how great is that darkness! In other Churches, the best members are most attentive to their respective social and Church meetings, while such as absent themselves habitually, are, at most, regarded but as nominal members. So it is with us likewise. It is a fact that can not be concealed or successfully controverted, that the most faithful, useful, and influential Methodists, are most devoted to our peculiar meetings, especially the weekly class, and most punctual to attend, while the lukewarm, worldly-minded, and disaffected, are least disposed to enjoy the privilege. Good members may be deprived of their class privilege by age, infirmity, sickness, or unavoidable hinderance, and timidity may, for a time, keep back some worthy young members; but with most delinquents, the great difficulty is want of disposition to attend. All willful delinquents in this duty, who have not a reasonable excuse, violate the terms of the compact between them and the Church. They are admitted first on trial, six months, the rules being read to them quarterly, and then received as

members on examination before the Church, they professing to believe her doctrines, and pledging themselves to keep her rules. Without consenting to these conditions in the presence of their brethren, they could never obtain membership among us. If they keep their promise of conformity to rule, the Church will be a nursing mother unto them, and do them good as long as they live; but if they break the covenant by willfully and habitually absenting themselves from the weekly class meeting, and can not be reclaimed, the Church may be placed under the disagreeable necessity of putting them away, lest their pernicious example corrupt others.

Now, what wrong would be done to such members by excluding them, according to disciplinary rule in such case made and provided? None whatever. In those communities where the people erect houses of worship, organize themselves into Churches, make their own ministers as they do their doctors and lawyers, then call and settle them, and finally dismiss them at pleasure, the lukewarm members may proclaim independence, and sustain each other in their delinquency; but our system is very different from this. None of us are educated *for* the ministry, though such as are called of God

to the work become educated *in* the ministry: do not wait for the call of the people, but go out and call them to repentance, faith, and Gospel obedience in the name of Christ. When converts are multiplied, and wish to come under our pastoral oversight, we explain the terms on which they can be received and retained; we agree to preach, administer the ordinances, and watch over them as pastors, so long as they avoid evil of every kind, do works meet for repentance, and attend all the appointed means of grace. They understand perfectly, that to retain the privileges they must fulfill the conditions, and that to fail in the latter is to forfeit the former. What just ground of complaint have such delinquents if the Church should exclude them? Churches are voluntary associations. No one becomes a member against his will; nor can he be retained against his consent; but the Church has some rights as well as individual members. Church rules are not enforced in this country by fining or imprisonment. There are no inquisitions nor tortures tolerated in the United States. The heaviest penalty inflicted for the worst crime, in ecclesiastical jurisprudence, is expulsion, and that creates no civil disability. The Church, at most, can only leave the

offender beyond her pale, where she first found him. But, in the case now under consideration, for neglect of class meeting, there is no expulsion as in case of crime, but simply this provision: "Let them be laid aside, and let the preacher show that they are excluded for a breach of our rules, and not for immoral conduct;" thus tenderly regarding both feeling and reputation.

The Treatise on Class Meetings is well-timed. Recently the tendency every-where is to unsettle old foundations, break up or modify long and well-tried systems, and substitute new and untried theories. This we regard as a hazardous experiment. No rage for improvement or reform should induce us to abandon what we have proved to be safe and profitable till we are sure of obtaining something better in exchange for it; and whatever serves to check this reckless spirit of innovation is worthy of serious consideration. Such, we trust, will be the effect of this Treatise, which comes to hand opportunely. It takes the true ground; does not place class meetings among the sacraments, neither among the things expressly commanded by name and in form, but among the prudential regulations of Methodism, where it properly belongs. The author is content to rest the

institution on the general basis of holy Scripture as a suitable regulation for the better performance of our pastoral work, and one both safe and profitable to the members. In its proper place as such it has not only accomplished incalculable good, but has likewise become indispensably necessary to the system of Church polity, of which it is a prominent feature. Methodism is a regular system. Its doctrines, experience, rules, and usages are all harmonious. Whoever embraces any part of it, to be consistent, should adopt the whole, and conform their hearts and lives to its wholesome requirements, or relinquish its privileges. To change the rule so as to allow its professors to attend class meeting or not, at their own option, and still remain members of the Church, would be practically to abolish the institution itself; and to abolish class meeting would be virtually to abandon Methodism, and let our Church members fall back into lifeless formality. There is among us no better test in general of the increase or decline of spiritual life than attendance on, or absence from these social meetings. Whoever willfully and habitually absents himself from them, is, by his brethren, regarded as backslidden; and hence the rule for reclaiming or excluding him as a useless member, to

make him fruitful, or to cut him off as a withered branch. Let no one, under a mistaken notion of improving Methodism, seek to have this test of membership done away, unless he prefers careless and worldly-minded professors of religion to living stones of the temple of God.

TREATISE

ON

CLASS MEETINGS.

CHAPTER I.

THE SOCIAL PRINCIPLE UPON WHICH CLASS MEETINGS ARE INSTITUTED.

SECTION I.

THE SOCIAL PRINCIPLE.

Social capacities and tendencies are strongly and strikingly characteristic of man; and it is hereby sufficiently indicated that Providence intended the social condition of the race. We are not formed nor intended to live each alone, in the seclusion of solitude. In such a state many of the best and noblest principles of our nature would be worse than useless. But few things exist in separate, independent states. One thing exists in relation to another. It has its character and course in view of the character and course of another. The existence and character of the one require and assume the existence and character of the other. There is

a relationship between the eye and the light. Without the one we could know nothing of the other. Either would, without the other, be totally useless to all the purposes and interests of vision; and so of the endowments and offices of man which look to the social state. Without this state, these endowments can not be employed—these offices can not be fulfilled. Our powers of mind, that might be employed for the guidance and good of each other, could not, in a condition of disseverance, be turned to any such beneficent purpose. Our affections of philanthropy and patriotism, of benevolence and pity, of sympathy and charity, of gratitude and love, must lie dead, or live unproductive of any fruits as blessings to each other.

This principle of association among men is a common and familiar one. It has often been adopted and acted upon as a bond of union and a measure of strength, and has ever developed itself as most efficient and productive. Without it, men are like the rods in the fable—exceeding fragile and quickly broken; but with it, and thereby closely united and strongly banded together, they are mighty in strength. It is thus that the greatest objects of human effort have been achieved. Thus governments have been formed, and extended abroad in

their far-reaching sway. Thus tyrants have been dethroned and crushed, the bands of slavery broken, the burdens of bondage thrown off, and the principles and privileges of right, and equity, and liberty secured and established.

In the more private relationships and concerns of life, men are, by association, mutual helps and comforts to each other. Their combined wisdom, and strength, and goodness become a common stock—a common source of supply. The young are trained and instructed by the experience and prudence of the aged; the ignorant are guided by the counsel of the wise; the weak are protected by the might of the strong; the poor are supplied by the benevolence and charities of the rich; the sick and the suffering are relieved and comforted by the sympathies and kindnesses of the healthful and the happy.

How infinitely better is a well-formed, social state, than solitude or anarchy! Solitude is a condition directly contrary to our true character and destiny—one in which we can never find our own well-being, nor render to others that help to which we are obliged by our nature and relations to them, and by the will of God. It is a condition so unnatural and repulsive as never to be sought, except through

the force of guilt, or bewildering griefs, or some mental delusion and fanaticism. To throw men together in a state of disorder and antagonism is equally contrary to their character and destructive to their well-being. It is only when intimately united in a well-ordered, social state that their true happiness can be secured. It is thus that the heavens are harmonious, and beam with brightness and glory. The sun and the planets that circle around it exist and move in orderly relation to each other. The stars, and suns, and systems that sweep far away through the distances of space, all exist in relationship, all move in harmony with each other. Here prevails the social principle; here is society through all these systems. Break up their well-adjusted relationships, and turn them from the courses of social order and harmony in which they move; let them come clashing one with another, or wander away each alone, and all would be confusion and ruin, or darkness and solitude. Equally fatal would it be to the welfare of man to deprive him of a well-ordered social state, or to break up the order and harmony that spring from that state.

Association is a measure to which men of kindred sympathies and purposes are led by a natural and common impulse. Thus, when

interested upon any common subject, or when in earnest for the achievement of any particular end, they have united together, not only by the association of their names upon the same roll, or meeting in public assemblage, but they have sought a direct, personal intercourse for their mutual encouragement and support. Much evil would be avoided if men did not so often avail themselves of this measure for corrupt and wicked purposes; and a greatly-increased amount of good would be accomplished if those aiming to be and to do good would always adopt it, and thus reap the rich fruits which it is so eminently calculated to produce.

SECTION II.

THE SOCIAL PRINCIPLE IN RELIGION.

The Church is founded upon the social principle. It is a society, or collection of societies. Religion is eminently social. The great body of its virtues and duties—such as constitute and adorn the Christian character and fill up the measure of Christian requirements—have immediate respect to the social state. Where may we, except in the social state, possess and exercise that charity without which there is no true religion—that charity "which suffereth long and is kind, which beareth all things,

believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things?" Where may we, except here, "let our light shine before men," and bless them by our example and admonition? Where else may we "rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep," or "be kindly-affectioned one to another with brotherly-love?" Where else may "we bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ?"

And it is only by this measure of association that the great ends of religion can be accomplished, and its great interests secured. In religion pre-eminently there is strength in association. One who shall chase a thousand is, indeed, mighty; but how vastly more mighty are two who shall put ten thousand to flight! There are rare instances where one servant of God, acting alone, has accomplished great things. Thus Elijah stood alone against the prophets of Baal, and the array of royalty, and the people, and signally triumphed over them. But usually the great enterprises of religion are carried on, and the signal triumphs of truth achieved, by the more general union of the people of God. Thus, when Israel went forth in concert, and were together true to their God and to their common cause, they ever triumphed over their foes. While the disciples of Christ

waited with one accord, in one place, the promised baptism of the Spirit came upon them; and while they went forth, in unison of spirit and purpose, and proclaimed the word of truth, it came in power, and was glorified in the salvation of many. And it is thus, through the principle of association, that the great, benevolent, and evangelical enterprises of the Church are in operation and development, and carrying abroad, to the benighted nations of the earth, the rich and precious blessings of religion.

We may well express our surprise that a measure so important in itself, and so consonant to the true character of religion, should be so much overlooked or disregarded. Particularly is there a surprising neglect or disregard of that intimate, personal, Christian association which is so in character with religion, and so important to us. As Christians, encompassed with infirmities, and encountering many adverse influences common to us all, we need all the helps, the comforts, and encouragements of an intimate association; we need all the support, the protection, and defense of this element of great strength. And the very spirit of the religion which we profess, and all the affections of brotherly-kindness and charity which it inspires, and all our common sympathies and

interests, prompt us to seek such association. And it is only when we are thus united that our religion can have fair and full exercise, so as to produce all its gracious results. These sentiments are well expressed in Dr. Alexander's "Evidences of Christianity:"

"Christians need the aid of the social principle to fix their attention, to create an interest, and to excite the feelings of devotion. The truth is, that if the heart be affected with lively emotions of piety, it will be pleasant, it will be useful, and it will be natural to give them expression. This will hold in regard to philosophers and men of learning, as well as others. Wherever a number of persons participate in the same feelings, there is a strong inclination to hold communion together; and, if sentiments of genuine piety exist in the bosoms of many, they will delight to celebrate in unison the praises of that Being whom they love and adore. There is no reason why pious emotions, more than others, should be smothered, and the tendency to express them counteracted. Such, indeed, will never be the fact. 'Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.' Piety, it is true, consists essentially in the exercises of the heart; but that religion which is merely mental is suspicious—at best

very feeble—is not likely to produce any permanent effect on the character or comfort of the person entertaining it, and can not be useful to others in the way of example."

SECTION III.

THE SOCIAL PRINCIPLE IN CLASS MEETINGS.

Class meetings form an important part of Methodist economy; especially of what is peculiar to that economy. In their requirements and provisions, in their duties and privileges, they pertain alike to every member, and address themselves directly to the Christian experience and character of all. The custom of weekly meetings, for purposes of personal, Christian intercourse, where the subject of communion is religious experience and deportment, and where all the exercises of communion, of exhortation, and encouragement are characterized by that plainness and candor which earnest religious interest and mutual confidence inspire, must produce a strong and benign influence upon all properly engaged in these exercises.

The principle of Christian association being common, more or less, to the various branches of the Church, can not be claimed as a peculiarity of Methodism. The *degree* to which

Methodism adopts it, and the *mode* through which she avails herself of it, form its peculiarity to her. She avails herself of the principle specially through her class meetings; and here it is done to an extraordinary degree; and there is hereby supplied to our societies that of which there is a great lack in many others.

It seems to us plain that the social principle in religion, as it obtains in various branches of the Church, is far below what it should be—that it fails, in a great measure, to secure that intimacy of Christian communion which accords with our relation to each other as the children of God, and which has often been exemplified in the history of the Church. As Christians, we sustain an intimate and endeared relation to each other. It is more than that existing between members of the same community or commonwealth; it is that sustained to each other by members of the same family. "Fellow-citizens with the saints" we are; but we are more; we are members, in common, "of the household of God." We are alike the children of God and brethren in Christ; and we are, therefore, exhorted to cultivate that unity and communion and to cherish toward each other those brotherly affections which are proper to this intimacy of relationship. "I,

therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." Again we are exhorted thus: "Let brotherly-love continue," and "Be kindly-affectioned one to another, with brotherly-love." "Christian love has its most obvious analogy with the domestic affections in its sense of relationship, as brethren, through one who is related equally to all, as Head." Such is the nearness of relationship between Christians, such the affections that they should cherish toward each other, and such the intimacy of association they should seek, as answering to this relationship and as prompted by these affections. And it is only when in the possession and exercise of all this that they can realize the privileges of their common brotherhood in Christ.

This intimacy of fellowship in Christ, this ardor and kindness of brotherly affection, have

often been exemplified in the history of the Church. "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another." Here is an instance among the godly of the Jewish Church. The details are not given; yet, from the general statement, and from the circumstances of the times, we are warranted in the belief of an intimate, brotherly association among these people of God. Witness the meetings of the disciples, where Christ came and stood in their midst. Here are evidences of the same brotherly communion and love. Thus, too, when the day of Pentecost was fully come, the disciples were all together, with one accord, in one place; and, after the addition of three thousand upon the day of Pentecost, the same heavenly fellowship was kept up. "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. . . And all that believed were together, and had all things common, and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people." The early history of the Christian Church furnishes many

other instances of like fellowship. They are also furnished at different times through the whole progress of the Church. They were particularly revived under Mr. Wesley. Intimate association was highly characteristic of his earlier religious meetings. It was a great leading measure in that wonderful reformation so gloriously wrought out through his instrumentality. He found that, by an intimate association of those who were awakened and turned to the Lord, the work of reformation was far more permanent, efficient, and successful. Such is the account Mr. Wesley has furnished us himself. Those who were awakened to the importance of religion, particularly sought his instruction and direction; and he says, "I asked, 'Which of you desire this? Let me know your names, and places of abode.' They did so; but I soon found they were too many for me to talk with severally so often as they wanted it. So I told them, 'If you will all of you come together every Thursday, in the evening, I will gladly spend some time with you in prayer, and give you the best advice I can.'

"Thus arose, without any previous design on either side, what was afterward called *a society;* a very innocent name, and very common in London for any number of people associating

themselves together. The thing proposed, in their associating themselves together, was obvious to every one. They wanted to 'flee from the wrath to come,' and to assist each other in so doing. They, therefore, united themselves, 'in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they might help each other to work out their salvation.'

"It quickly appeared, that their thus uniting together answered the end proposed therein. In a few months the far greater part of those who had begun to 'fear God and work righteousness,' but were not united together, grew faint in their minds, and fell back into what they were before. Meanwhile, the far greater part of those who were thus united together continued 'striving to enter in at the strait gate,' and to 'lay hold on eternal life.'" Here was the measure, and here were the benefits of an intimate Christian association.

There surely is great danger of falling far below this measure of Christian association. Often the tone of piety and the external circumstances of the Church are both unfavorable to it. It is only an earnest tone of religion, and an ardent state of Christian affections, that will lead us to seek such association. As

experimental religion declines, and the intensity of the religious affections abates, the children of God will find themselves drawn away from each other; they will so far lose even their relish for "the communion of saints." This is a truth that accords with much personal experience, and is supported by the most extended observation upon Christian denominations. Then, whenever Christian experience, earnestness, and enjoyment decline, and the religious affections lose their fervency, the true social principle, in religion, is in danger; it must so far be weakened, and fail of its preserving and sustaining efficiency, and of its abundant good fruits. Here, then, upon these grounds, there is great danger to the principle of true Christian association. It is sadly in accordance with Christian experience, and with the history of the various Churches, that there is ever a tendency to fall below—far below—the true standard of Christian experience and enjoyment, brotherly kindness and love. And the liability to this is only the greater, in the absence of some efficient measure of Christian communion, which may serve to cultivate and develop our religious experience, and our brotherly love and care for each other. And in this the Churches generally are greatly deficient.

But we apprehend the greater danger now, to the true principle of Christian association, from the state of the Church in relation to society or the world. There have been many periods in the history of the Church, when the pressure of circumstances from without brought Christians close together in intimate communion, and earnest concern and sympathy for each other. These were the times when the powers of oppression were employed, and the fires of persecution were kindled against the children of God. Then, especially, they sought to be one in Christ. Then they sought for comfort and support in a close fellowship, and in their mutual sympathies and love. At such times Christians have come together as a common brotherhood—as members of the same family. The history of the spiritual and godly part of the Church furnishes a continuous illustration of this truth. "The relative condition of the Christian body, as hitherto it has existed in the world, gives it always much of the feeling that belongs to a family, or a small and distinct community, barely tolerated, and unkindly received, in a foreign land. Every-where a small minority, and every-where, if not outraged, scorned, and holding, in common, a bright hope, which the mass of mankind treats with

contempt, Christians, in proportion to the vivacity of their faith, can not but cling together as partners in obloquy and danger. This feeling is distinctly seen in operation, even where external circumstances most tend to repress it; nor is there any sphere within which spiritually-minded persons do not feel that they need each other's aid and affection, as a support against the hostility that surrounds them. It is no misanthropic sentiment which compels them to close their ranks, and present a front of defense against the malignant crowd that hems them in. 'Behold,' said their Lord, 'I send you forth as sheep among wolves;' nor has an age yet passed over the Church which afforded no exemplification of the truth thus conveyed." (Isaac Taylor.)

Such has been, almost constantly, the condition of the Church. But is not that condition now much changed? The numbers of the Church are greatly increased. Her social position and influence are elevated and enlarged. The Church has greatly influenced the society without her pale; and that society, in its turn, tends greatly to influence her. Thus there is a mutual approximation. The consequences are these: Christians are drawn away to mingle more freely in the society of the world; and,

by so much, they are drawn away from an intimate association with each other. All this is very plain, and needs no further illustration. Here, then, is the great danger, at present, to the true principle of Christian association. It arises from the present position of the Church in relation to society or the world.

Now, against both these sources of danger and evil, every branch of the Church should make the best provision possible. And the provision to be made, is some measure that will most efficiently preserve the principle of intimate Christian association, and most effectually deepen and develop our religious experience and brotherly affection, and call forth our love and sympathy for each other. And thus our Christian association will efficiently promote the very principles which, in turn, will strengthen and support it.

As stated above, the measure provided in our branch of the Church, in order to secure these great objects, is specially the institution of class meetings. This measure has great advantages; it has the elements of peculiar adaptation and efficiency. The meetings of our classes are stated and regular. The duty of attendance extends alike to all. The subjects of communion are religious experience and

deportment. Here plainly is true Christian association. And thus the principles of religious experience, and the strength of Christian affections, are promoted, which, in turn, strengthen and sustain it. And some such measure—some provision of similar adaptation and results, seems to us indispensable to the higher spirituality and piety, the higher prosperity and welfare of every branch of the Church. We may here well adopt the following quotation from "Notes on the Discipline," by Bishops Coke and Asbury. "We have made many remarks, in the course of our work, on the necessity of Christian fellowship; but this can not be carried on to any considerable advantage, without stated solemn times of assembling. The meetings, held for this purpose, must have a name to distinguish them. We call ours *class meetings* and *band meetings;* but of the former we are to speak at present. Here we must notice, that it is *the thing itself—Christian fellowship*—and not the name, which we contend for. The experience of about sixty years has fully convinced us of its necessity; and we ourselves can say that, in the course of an extensive acquaintance with men and things, and the Church of God, for about twenty or thirty years, we have rarely met with one who

has been much devoted to God, and at the same time not united in close Christian fellowship to some religious society or other. Far be it from us to suppose that no fellowship meetings except ours are owned of God. So illiberal a sentiment never entered our minds. But we must say, that those who entirely neglect this *divinely-instituted* ordinance—however various the names given to it, or the modes of conducting it, may be—manifest that they are either ashamed to acknowledge *as their brethren* the true children of God, or 'are the enemies of the cross of Christ.' They wish to keep up a correspondence with the world which Christian discipline could not long tolerate, or they can not bear to have their wounds probed to the bottom, that the balm of Gilead—the healing wine and oil of the Gospel—may be applied by the divine Physician, 'and the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, cleanse them from all sin.' "

We have dwelt thus long upon this subject, because we wished to develop somewhat this great fundamental, living principle of Christian association upon which class meetings are instituted. We wished, also, to indicate, with some clearness, how fully and how efficiently this principle was embraced in our class meet-

ings. The fuller consideration of this point will, however, remain as the subject of a future section of this treatise. We know of no measure, in any branch of the Church, that so fully and efficiently embraces and employs this indispensable principle as our class meetings. The principle of intimate Christian association is necessary to every well-ordered Church government. Without it there can not be a high development of spirituality and moral force; there can not be great permanence, progress, or prosperity. And it is to the adoption of this principle, to so great an extent, and in so appropriate and efficient a mode, as in her class meetings, that Methodism owes much of her vigor and growth, much of her spirituality and power, and, consequently, much of her efficiency in doing good. Class meetings should, therefore, be dear to all the friends of Methodism, and should receive the hearty approval and support of all in her communion.

CHAPTER II.

THE DESIGN OF CLASS MEETINGS.

SECTION I.

THE ORIGIN AND PRIMARY PURPOSE OF CLASS MEETINGS.

THE design of class meetings is not now what it was at their origin. They were formed at first from financial considerations. They were instituted as a measure for raising funds, by collections, in small sums, from the members generally, to meet the expenses incurred in the support of that glorious revival of religion then beginning so widely to diffuse its light and life through the masses of society. I will furnish the account of their origin and primary purpose in Mr. Wesley's own words, from his "Plain Account of the People called Methodists." This account will also show the great necessity there was for class meetings, or for some similar institution, and the great benefits resulting from them. It is as follows:

"But as much as we endeavored to watch over each other, we soon found some who did not live the Gospel. I do not know that any hypocrites were crept in; for, indeed, there was

no temptation; but some grew cold, and gave way to the sins which had long easily beset them. We quickly perceived there were many ill consequences of suffering these to remain among us. It was dangerous to others, inasmuch as all sin is of an infectious nature. It brought such a scandal on their brethren as exposed them to what was not properly the reproach of Christ. It laid a stumbling-block in the way of others, and caused the truth to be evil spoken of.

"We groaned under these inconveniences long before a remedy could be found. The people were scattered so wide in all parts of the town, from Wapping to Westminster, that I could not easily see what the behavior of each person in his own neighborhood was; so that several disorderly walkers did much harm before I was apprised of it.

"At length, while we were thinking of quite another thing, we struck upon a method for which we have cause to bless God ever since. I was talking with several of the society in Bristol concerning the means of paying the debts there, when one stood up, and said, 'Let every member of the society give a penny a week till all are paid.' Another answered, 'But many of them are poor, and can not

afford to do it.' 'Then,' said he, 'put eleven of the poorest with me; and if they can give any thing, well. I will call on them weekly; and if they can give nothing, I will give for them as well as for myself; and each of you call on eleven of your neighbors weekly, receive what they give, and make up what is wanting.' It was done. In a while, some of these informed me, they found such and such a one did not live as he ought. It struck me immediately, 'This is the thing, the very thing we have wanted so long.' I called together all the leaders of the classes—so we used to term them and their companies—and desired that each would make a particular inquiry into the behavior of those he saw weekly. They did so. Many disorderly walkers were detected. Some turned from the evil of their ways. Some were put away from us. Many saw it with fear, and rejoiced unto God with reverence.

"As soon as possible, the same method was used in London and all other places. Evil men were detected and reproved. They were borne with for a season. If they forsook their sins, we received them gladly; if they obstinately persisted therein, it was openly declared that they were not of us. The rest mourned and

prayed for them, and yet rejoiced that, as far as in us lay, the scandal was rolled away from the society."

Such were the origin and the primary purpose of class meetings. A similar but much abbreviated account of the subject is given by Mr. Wesley, in his "Sermon on God's Vineyard." But the above account is sufficient; nd it is a most interesting one. We here earn the sad consequences resulting from a want of proper association among those striving to flee the wrath to come and to lay hold upon eternal life. On the other hand we see the happy consequences resulting from a proper association. In the former instance many turned aside from the ways of righteousness who, nevertheless, remained at once an infection and scandal to the society; in the other instance many were preserved from such delinquencies, many delinquents were reclaimed, and those who could not be recovered from their wanderings were excluded from the society.

The plan, at the first institution of class meetings, was for the leader to go round from house to house, and call personally on each member of his class. This was the plan at first adopted by Mr. Wesley in regard to those

who particularly desired his instructions upon the subject of their souls' salvation. But he soon found this inconvenient and burdensome. He, therefore, appointed a place and regular times of meeting, so that he might see them and instruct them together, and where they might unite in prayer and exhortation for each other's good. So in the instance of class meetings. It was soon found inconvenient to visit the members personally from house to house. This was specially the case after there was added to the primary purpose of collections the higher design of a strict inquiry into the religious character of each member. In the prosecution of this work great inconveniences were encountered; so that here, too, the mode was soon changed, and a regular meeting was appointed where the whole class might come together.

Long since the first institution of class meetings, they have had another and a far higher aim than a mere financial one. Like many other peculiarities of Methodism, they were the creature of circumstances. Should we not rather say, the creature of Providence? These peculiarities were the creature of circumstances so far as the plans and purposes of the founders of Methodism were concerned, but

of Providence, as so ordering and controlling the circumstances as graciously to bring forth from them the various parts of our Church economy. And must we not stand in admiration of that Providence which, in this instance, so strikingly led Mr. Wesley and those united with him "in a way that they had not known, and in paths they knew not?" They saw the evils besetting the work of reformation, and they mourned over them; but where to find a remedy, or how to provide a deliverance therefrom, they knew not. Here God interposed, opened up the way, and furnished the plan. Mr. Wesley quickly saw it. Immediately he says, "This is the thing, the very thing we have wanted so long." It flashed upon his vision as did the horses and chariots of fire flash on the vision of the servant of Elisha.

SECTION II.

THE DESIGN OF CLASS MEETINGS PARTICULARLY STATED.

Class meetings constitute a measure through which to bring all the members under the immediate oversight of the Church. This oversight is sought with a view to the primary design of discerning the religious character of the members; and this discernment of the religious character of the members is sought with

an ultimate twofold design: 1. That such as turn aside, or tend to turn aside, from the way of righteousness, may be recovered and restored; 2. That those who can not be recovered and restored may be separated from the Church. These several points, as thus stated, may be briefly illustrated.

1. Class meetings constitute a measure through which to bring all the members under the immediate oversight of the Church. While the members of the Methodist societies were mainly in a separate condition, and scattered abroad through a large community, and subject only to a general pastoral care, as Church members mostly are, such oversight could not be had. This was fully realized by Mr. Wesley and others associated with him; and such any pastor having the charge of a considerable number would find to be the case. He could not himself so mingle with them as to become familiar and well acquainted with all. He could not keep up such a watch-care over them as to acquire and maintain a sufficient knowledge of their religious state and deportment. He might be well acquainted with a few, or he might occasionally see his members generally, and, for the time, have sufficient information of their deportment. But they might be

greatly changed in their religious state and life long before he could see them again, and of which changes he must, in most instances, remain in ignorance. And it is not necessary to the truth of these remarks that we assume a great neglect of pastoral visitation. They are entirely true, though that good work be diligently prosecuted. The pastor might see his members frequently in the place of public assemblage for religious worship; but he could not, from this, acquire sufficient information of their religious character. Thus, then, in many instances, the pastor could not tell whether the members of his charge remained steadfast and immovable, or whether they trembled to their fall, or had already fallen; whether they walked worthy of their high calling, or whether their lives were a reproach to the Christian profession.

Now, against this disability—such we may call it—class meetings are intended to provide. The entire membership of a pastoral charge is divided into small companies, which are placed under the care of suitable persons, as leaders, so that every member may be seen and conversed with directly upon his religious character once a week. Thus the leaders, by this frequent and direct intercourse with the mem-

bers, may exercise a constant oversight, and acquire and maintain a sufficient knowledge of all; and through them the pastor may know the religious character of all the members under his care. All are thus brought under the direct watch-care of the Church. Class meetings are instituted with a view to this purpose; and they constitute a measure that well serves this end.

2. This oversight is sought with a view to the primary design of discerning the religious characters of the members. Such is the end specially proposed in the institution of class meetings; and it is one which is thus very successfully achieved. As the character of all is hereby brought under the immediate oversight of the Church, so the character of all may be sufficiently discerned. Strict inquiry is made into the religious experience of each member; into his trials and temptations, his discouragements and declinings; into his encouragements and advancements, his growth in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. Strict inquiry is also made into the religious habits of each member; into the manner of life which each pursues; whether he avoids that which is evil and practices that which is good; whether he attends upon the ordinances of God. Thus

our Church proposes to acquaint herself with the Christian character of all her members. Through the institution of class meetings each member is brought under her immediate watch-care, so that he may be known—his religious experience and deportment inquired into and ascertained.

3. This discernment of the religious character of the members is sought with an ultimate twofold design.

The first is, that such as turn aside, or tend to turn aside, may be recovered and restored. Temptations and trials, discouragements and declinings often occur in the experience of Christians. Through the weaknesses of their own nature, and the many evil influences that bear upon them from without, they frequently tend to declensions or wanderings in religion. Such need counsel and encouragement, support and comfort; and these the Church should promptly render. But in order to this she must know the religious state of her members; otherwise, these duties must be neglected. It is, therefore, with a view to the requisite information for the proper performance of these duties, that our Church seeks to ascertain the religious state of her members through the institution of class meetings.

The second end proposed in seeking this discernment of the religious character of the members is, that such as fail to give evidence of a proper desire of salvation, and that such as forsake the way of righteousness, and can not be recovered and restored, may be separated from the Church. To separate such is a duty directly enjoined in the Scriptures. It is one that the Church owes to herself and to her divine Founder. But, in order to the proper performance of this duty, she must maintain a constant watch-care over her members, that she may have timely information of such cases as require an application of discipline in their exclusion. And this is an end at which our Church aims in seeking the discernment of the religious state and deportment of her members through the institution of class meetings.

The design of class meetings, as stated in our book of Discipline, agrees with the views above given. The subject is thus presented in the Discipline: "That it may the more easily be discerned whether they [the members of the Methodist societies] are indeed working out their own salvation, each society is divided into smaller companies, called classes, one of whom is styled *the leader*. It is his duty to see each person in his class once a week at

least, in order to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require; to inform the minister of any that walk disorderly, and will not be reproved." The design of class meetings, as clearly implied in the duty of the leader, is further expressed thus: "Let each leader carefully inquire how every soul of his class prospers; not only how each person observes the outward rules, but how he grows in the knowledge and love of God."

It is plain, from these quotations, that the design of class meetings is the ascertainment of the gracious state and religious deportment of the several members. This is the purpose for which societies are divided into classes, and all the members brought under the immediate oversight of the Church, that it may the more easily be discerned what the religious character of each is; whether he is indeed working out his own salvation. This design is fully implied in the duties imposed upon the leaders, to see each person in their several classes once a week at least, in order to inquire how their souls prosper; not only how each person observes the outward rules, but how he grows in the knowledge and love of God.

It is plain, further, that this ascertainment

of the Christian character of the members is sought in order that timely and suitable instruction, advice, reproof, comfort, or exhortation may be given, as the particular religious state or deportment of any may require, so that they may be delivered from their discouragements and declinings, and recovered from any faults or disorderly steps. It is with a direct view to this that it is made the duty of the leader particularly to inquire into the religious state of those placed under his care.

Further, it is equally plain that this design of ascertaining the religious character of the members is aimed at with a direct view to the proper administration of discipline. The purpose is, that those who walk disorderly, and will not be reproved, or who, by their wickedness, bring a scandal upon the cause of Christ, shall be duly reported, and, according to the rule in the case, separated from her communion. Such, according to the Discipline of the Church, is the design of class meetings.

This design agrees very exactly with Mr. Wesley's account of their first institution, of the evils from which they brought deliverance, and the various good purposes which they served. It is not claimed that these are the only objects accomplished—the only gracious

results achieved; yet it is urged that these are *the ends* designed in the institution of class meetings. It is cordially granted that they are invaluable as a mean of grace; that their exercises tend directly and efficiently to promote experimental and practical religion. Still this is not their primary aim. Nor is it so important as the design stated above; the one so clearly set forth in our Discipline. I ask particular attention to the point made as to the design of class meetings, because of its truthfulness and importance; more especially because of its pertinence and importance to future sections of this treatise. Could I believe that any one, having considered the subject, would dispute the position taken as to their design, I would specially attempt its defense. But it seems to me so exactly to accord with the language of the Discipline as to leave no room for doubt, or for any difference of opinion.

SECTION III.

CLASS MEETINGS NOT A CONFESSIONAL.

It has often been charged by priests of the Papacy, that our class meetings are a corrupted form of the confessional. Several things are implied in this charge: 1. There is an assumption that the Papal confessional is a genuine,

divine institution; 2. That class meetings are, in some mode and measure, a confessional; 3. That class meetings are a corrupted form of the confessional, inasmuch as they differ from the Papal. These several points may be briefly considered; particularly as this will afford an opportunity further to show the true, Scriptural design of our class meetings.

There is here, then, an assumption that the Papal confessional is a genuine, Scriptural, divine institution. As the charge of a counterfeit coin implies a genuine and authorized one, which is counterfeited, so the charge of a corrupted form of the confessional assumes a true and authorized confessional, of which it is a corruption. And the assumption here, of course, is, that the Papal confessional is a true and divinely-authorized one. But all this is mere assumption, and without any show of reason whatever for its support. In briefly considering this point, we must state, at least in part, what the confessional is, and what is alleged in its support.

What is the confessional? Or what is confession, according to the dogmas of the Papacy?

1. It is an essential part of the sacrament of penance, and is, therefore, sacramental in its

character. "If any one says that in the Catholic Church penance is not truly a sacrament, instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ to reconcile the faithful to God, as often as they sin after baptism, let him be accursed. . . If any one denies that three acts are requisite in a penitent for the entire and perfect remission of sins, which are, as it were, the matter of the sacrament of penance, namely, contrition, *confession*, and satisfaction, which are called the three parts of penance, etc., let him be accursed." (Canons of the Council of Trent.) Here the sacramental character of confession, as an essential part of penance, is fully stated.

2. Confession is required to be made to the priest as unto Christ. "Humbled in spirit, the sincere penitent casts himself down at the feet of the priest, to testify, by this his humble demeanor, that he acknowledges the necessity of eradicating pride, the root of all those enormities which he now deplores. In the minister of God, who sits in the tribunal of penance as his legitimate judge, he venerates the power and person of our Lord Jesus Christ; for in the administration of this, as in that of the other sacraments, the priest represents the character and discharges the functions of Jesus Christ." "On the same principle must it prove

most salutary to those whose minds are agitated by the consciousness of guilt, to make known the diseases and wounds of their souls to the priest, as the vicegerent of Jesus Christ, bound to eternal secrecy by every law, human and divine." (Catechism of the Council of Trent.) True enough it is, then, according to the doctrines of the Papacy, that confession must be made to the priest as unto Christ. The confessing penitent must cast himself down at the confessor's feet. He must recognize and venerate the power and person of our Lord Jesus Christ, as embodied and represented in the priest, sitting as his legitimate judge, in the tribunal of penance. He must regard and reverence him as invested with the functions of Christ, and acting as his vicegerent.

3. This confession is not limited to the priest; it is made also to other finite creatures—others who are far away and know nothing of it. The style of confession runs thus: "I confess to the almighty God, to the blessed Virgin Mary, to the blessed Michael, the archangel, to the blessed John the Baptist, to the holy apostles, Peter and Paul, to all the saints in heaven, and to you, my father, that I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word, and deed." (Ursuline Manual.)

4. This Papal confession must be private and detailed, disclosing the most secret thoughts and feelings of the heart. "Mortal sins, as we have already said, although buried in the darkest secrecy, and also sins of desire only, such as are forbidden by the ninth and tenth commandments, are all and each of them to be made matter of confession." "With the bare enumeration of our sins, we should not be satisfied; that enumeration we should accompany with the relation of such circumstances as considerably aggravate or extenuate their malice. Some circumstances are such as, of themselves, to constitute mortal guilt; on no account or occasion whatever, therefore, are such circumstances to be omitted." "So important is integrity to confession, that if the penitent willfully neglect to accuse himself of some sins which should be confessed, and suppress others, he not only does not obtain the pardon of his sins, but involves himself in deeper guilt." "Secrecy should be strictly observed as well by penitent as priest; and hence, because in such circumstances secrecy must be insecure, no one can, on any account, confess by messenger or letter." "The faithful are to be admonished that there is no reason whatever to apprehend that what is made known in confession will

ever be revealed by any priest, or that by it the penitent can, at any time, be brought into difficulty or danger. 'Let the priest,' says the great Council of Lateran, 'take special care, neither by word nor sign, nor by any other means whatever, to betray, in the least degree, the sacred trust confided to him by the sinner.'" (Catechism of the Council of Trent.)

5. This confession must be made, in order to priestly absolution or pardon. "Whoever shall affirm that the priest's sacramental absolution is not a judicial act, but only a ministry, to pronounce and declare that the sins of the party confessing are forgiven, so that he believes himself absolved, even though the priest should not absolve seriously, but be in jest, let him be accursed." (Canon of the Council of Trent.) "The Redeemer instituted the sacrament of penance, in which we cherish a well-grounded hope that our sins are forgiven us by the absolution of the priest, and the faith which we justly have, in the efficacy of the sacraments, has much influence in tranquilizing the troubled conscience and giving peace to the soul. The voice of the priest, who is legitimately constituted a minister for the remission of sins, is to be heard as that of Christ himself, who said to the lame man, 'Son, be of good cheer; thy sins

are forgiven thee.'" "Unlike the authority given to the priests of the old law, to declare the leper cleansed from his leprosy, the power with which the priests of the new law are invested is not simply to declare that sins are forgiven, but, as the ministers of God, really to absolve from sin: a power which God himself, the author and source of grace and justification, exercises through their ministry." (Catechism of the Council of Trent.)

Such, in brief, is the auricular confessional of the Romish Church. We proposed to notice what is alleged in its support. This we find, however, would carry us beyond due limits. Nor is it necessary to the notice which the occasion required us to give the subject.

The second point assumed in the charge above named is, that class meetings are, in some mode and measure, a confessional. Nothing is further from the truth than this assumption. And the charge which involves it is made either in ignorance, or with some ill intent. And if the Romish bishops or priests, who make the charge, are in ignorance upon the subject, and would avail themselves of the privilege of attending our class meetings twice or thrice, and be spoken to, by our leaders, upon their religious state, and hear the expe

rience of our members, they might come to a better understanding. In all kindness and good feeling we propose to them to take this course.

We have sufficiently explained the design of class meetings, in the second section of this chapter. And, most plainly, that design does not embrace or involve a single element of the confessional. They are wholly different and distinct from each other, in all their exercises and offices, in all their modes and purposes. Note some of the differences.

The confessional is sacramental. Nothing of the kind is claimed for our class meetings; nothing of the kind is or can be allowed to them.

The confessional of Rome requires confession to be made to the priest, as representing the person and invested with the prerogatives of Christ. In our class meetings, a statement of our religious state and deportment is made to the minister, simply as pastor, having this official oversight of the Church, or to a brother member, in some measure representing the pastor.

In the confessional, confession is made also to the Virgin Mary, to John the Baptist, to the apostles, Peter and Paul, to the saints in

heaven, and so on. All this our class meetings reject as idolatry.

This Papal confession must be detailed and private. The most hidden acts of the life, together with their circumstances, the most hidden thoughts and feelings of the heart, must be secretly breathed into the ear of the priest, and all must remain as a sworn secret with the confessor and confessant. In our class meetings only a general statement of the various particulars of Christian character is made; and this is done in the social circle of the class without any view to secrecy whatever.

In the confessional of the Papacy, confession to the priest is necessary to pardon, and must be made in order to priestly absolution. Nothing of all this blasphemy is found in our class meetings. There is no confession, like that of the Papacy, at all; and statements of Christian character are made simply with a view to the giving of such instruction, advice, or admonition as particular cases may require, and, further, to ascertain such instances as may occur of unworthiness for Church membership, that suitable discipline may be applied.

Could any two things be more unlike than the confessional of Rome and the class meetings of the Methodist Episcopal Church? In

all their modes and purposes they stand directly opposed to each other. Nor is there an item of Scripture for the support of the modes and designs of the Romish confessional; and the whole system, as practiced by that Church, has ever been a rife source of scandal, of delusion and destruction, of priestly corruption and oppression, and of laic degradation and ruin. Nor need it seem strange that those who practice such a usage, whether deceiving or being deceived, should try to implicate our class meetings as similar in some measure, seeking thereby some apology for it, or to weaken somewhat the overwhelming objections that lie against it.

In the third instance, it is involved in the charge above noticed, that class meetings are a corruption of the Romish confessional, inasmuch as they differ from it. But surely they can not be a corruption of the confessional, when they do not contain a single element or feature, not a single trace or the faintest outline of it. You might as well call the Christianity of St. Paul a corruption of the *heathenism* of Nero.

Certain usages of public, detailed confession have, in some instances, obtained in Protestant Churches, that have no analogy to the exercises

of our class meetings; and such a confession before the Church or the world is no where enjoined in the Scriptures as a term of pardon. Nor is it a duty imposed upon Christians. Of course our sins must be confessed to God in order to forgiveness. But even here there is often, from necessity of inability in us, a limitation of detailed confession. Where one trespasses against another the whole may be adjusted privately between the two. (Matt. xviii, 15.) It is plain from this that it is not required of him, who has committed the trespass, to go and make a display of it by a detailed confession before the Church or the world. The same truth is contained in Matt. v, 23, 24. It is agreed that where Church members are chargeable with delinquencies or faults which bring scandal upon the Church, they are required to make suitable confession. But two things are here to be noted: 1. Such faults or delinquencies are already known; otherwise, they could not bring scandal upon the Church; and, therefore, the confession, in such case, is not a disclosure of unknown delinquencies or faults, but an expression of sorrow for those which are already known. 2. This confession is not required in order to forgiveness from God, but to justify the Church in retaining or

receiving them again into her communion. Nor is there any warrant in the word of God for any such detailed, open confession of secret faults in order to forgiveness. And such confessions are not in accordance with the requisition that all things be done decently, and in order, and to edification. They minister to scandal and disorder rather than to honor and edification. They are, therefore, plainly repugnant to the Scriptures, and, hence, divinely prohibited.

We have deemed it important thus particularly to set forth the principles and purposes of class meetings, and to guard them against the charge or supposition that they in any wise partake of the nature of a confessional, whether private or public, Papal or Protestant. There is often, in our class meetings, a Scriptural statement of Christian experience and practice in response to the inquiries of the leader; there is often a Scriptural confession of faults of one to another; but all this is entirely dissimilar to such confessions as we have above noticed.

Such, then, is the design of class meetings. Such are the principles and purposes of their institution. They constitute a measure through which to bring all the members under the immediate oversight of the Church, so that the

religious state and deportment of all may be known; in order, 1. That suitable and timely instruction and admonition, reproof and comfort, exhortation and encouragement, may be given, as the religious condition and conduct of any may require; 2. That such as are unworthy of Christian fellowship, and can not be reclaimed or restored, may be excluded from the communion of the Church.

And surely we can scarcely fail to be deeply impressed that these principles and purposes of our class meetings are exceedingly important. They must enter, as prominent measures and designs, into the economy of every well-furnished and well-administered form of Church government. There must be a close watch-care of the Church extended over her members. There must be, on the part of the Church, a knowledge of their religious state and deportment. There must be instruction and reproof, advice and exhortation, comfort and encouragement, as they have need. There must be a suitable application of discipline in the exclusion of the unworthy. What is a Church without these things? What good ends of a Church does it answer if they be omitted or neglected? They must, in some mode or other, be embraced and performed by every properly formed and

well-administered Church government. However, the importance of these principles and offices of our class meetings will more fully appear in connection with subjects hereafter to be considered.

CHAPTER III.

THE OBLIGATION OF CLASS MEETINGS: FIRST GENERAL ARGUMENT.

SECTION I.

CLASS MEETINGS, AS A REGULATION OF OUR CHURCH, CONSTITUTE A TERM OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

MR. WESLEY held class meetings as obligatory, and required of the members of his societies an attendance upon them. But the matter was different then from what it is now. He did not consider his societies as constituting a Church, but merely as religious societies, the members being thus associated for mutual assistance and edification. Thus they continued till after his death. He did not, therefore, regard membership in them as Church membership; so that, while he required attendance upon class as a term of membership in his societies, he did not require it as a term of Church membership. Whether he would have dispensed with this requisition, in case he had given to his societies an independent, regular Church organization, is not, so far as I know, made known to us. Yet, upon this subject, we

are scarcely left to doubt as to the course he would have taken. The light in which he viewed them, the necessity which he saw and felt for some such measure, and the many great and good ends which he found them so efficient to achieve, warrant us in the belief that he would have retained them as an obligatory usage in the formation of a regular, independent Church. We have no information that he ever expressed any disapproval of their being required as a term of Church membership, when the societies in this country were, according to his purpose and arrangement, formed into a separate, independent Church. The inference is fair that he approved of their being so enjoined as a regulation of our Church.

Our Church holds her class meetings as obligatory, and requires of her members an attendance upon them as a term of membership. Such is the position in which they have stood with us ever since the first organization of our Church. That they are enjoined as a term of Church membership is clearly set forth in the Discipline. The rule stands thus: "What shall we do with those members of our Church who willfully and repeatedly neglect to meet their class? Let the elder, deacon, or one of the preachers, visit them whenever it is practi-

cable, and explain to them the consequence if they continue to neglect; namely, exclusion. If they do not amend, let him who has the charge of the circuit or station bring their case before the society or a select number, before whom they shall have been cited to appear; and if they be found guilty of willful neglect by the decision of a majority of the members, before whom the cause is brought, let them be laid aside, and let the preacher show that they are excluded for a breach of our rules, and not for immoral conduct." (Chap. v, Sect. iii, Quest. 4.) Attendance upon class does, therefore, with us constitute a term of Church membership, since, according to the rule just quoted from the Discipline, persons must be laid aside—deprived of their membership—if they willfully and repeatedly neglect to meet their class.

And yet we regard our class meetings simply as a prudential regulation. Mr. Wesley himself so regarded and styled them. They are a usage which our Church has herself instituted. Even the rule of Discipline which enjoins the exclusion of such as will not attend them, regards them merely as a prudential measure. Hence, it is to be distinctly noted that those who are excluded for refusing to attend them

are excluded merely for a breach of rules, and not for immoral conduct.

Nor have we any purpose to assume and defend the obligation of class meetings as authorized by any express Scripture warrant, so far as their mere mode is concerned. This, we think, could not be successfully done. Such passages as, "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another," and, "When the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus, and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you," would not authorize the position of a Divine warrant, expressed in Scripture, for the form of class meetings as they exist among us. Nor will any other passages be found to set forth or express their mere form; and yet the obligation of class meetings, as a condition of Church membership, must not be rested upon any ground which the Scriptures do not fairly authorize. But does it hence follow that the institution itself is without such warrant, or indefensible, because its mere mode is not plainly revealed in the Scriptures? Surely not. We hope to make this fully and clearly appear; and deeming this part of our subject of chief importance, we purpose as full a discussion of it as our limits will allow.

SECTION II.

PRINCIPLE OF THE FIRST GENERAL ARGUMENT EXPLAINED AND ESTABLISHED: PREROGATIVE OF THE CHURCH IN PRUDENTIAL REGULATIONS.

Let us particularly state the subject now in hand. We have before us first the discussion of this principle: May a Church require conformity to a merely-prudential measure as a term of Church membership? We have then the application of this principle to a particular prudential measure—that of our class meetings. Such is the subject now in hand.

May a Church require conformity to a merely-prudential measure as a term of Church membership? The discussion of the principle involved in this question will occupy the present section. The application of the principle will remain as the subject for the next.

There is ever a tendency to extremes, in the judgment of the various Churches, as to the obligation of prudential regulations in religion—extremes in judgment, both as to the ground and extent of their obligation. Some regard the Church as endowed with such plenary prerogative, such infallibility and unlimited power, as that whatever regulations she institutes as requisites in religion are of equal

authority and coextensive obligation with those institutions which Christ, the founder and head of the Church, has himself appointed and expressly enjoined in his word. This is one extreme. Others are disposed to regard all usages of the Church which are not ordained of God and expressly enjoined in his word, as unlawful, or without any obligation whatever. Here is another extreme. These two lie opposite to each other, and are far apart. And they are about equally distant from the truth; for much truth there is between them. And it is for this truth that we are now to search. Nor do we think the discovery of it will be difficult.

There are many things revealed in the Scriptures, and enjoined upon the Church, which must not be changed or omitted. Such are settled by Divine authority, and are obligatory always and every-where. Of these are the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel; the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper; the holy observance of the Sabbath; the public worship of God; the ministry of the word; and so on. All these institutions exist by the appointment of God, and their obligation rests in the authority of his command. All of them must, therefore, be received and observed by

every true branch of the Church of Christ. Here no Church, nor all together, have any discretionary prerogative. This is so plain as not to require illustration or defense.

And no branch of the Church may institute, or enjoin any usages or regulations for her government, or to be observed in her worship, which are plainly repugnant to the Scriptures, or to true experimental and practical religion, or which are not intended, and do not promise, in some measure, to serve her peace and prosperity. This, too, is so plain as not to require any illustration or defense.

But within these limits, much—very much—is left to the discretion of the Church, to be determined in view of times and circumstances, or the indications of Providence. And no one, without much reflection, is aware how far the exercise of this prerogative obtains now, and has ever obtained, in the Church; no one, without this reflection, is aware how far it must obtain.

It is a very plain truth, that the Church exists as a society, or collection of societies. It thus exists according to the will and appointment of Christ, its divine founder—according to its institution or formation under the apostles. Christianity, in its establishment in the world,

was not intended to be merely a system of doctrines and rules of life, to be privately embraced, believed, and obeyed by men, severally and separately. It proposed to collect them together, to unite them in a religious community or communities, and to place them under suitable Christian government. This truth, which is important to the principle of our present argument, is well set forth by Archbishop Whately:

"Of all who acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as their master, 'the author and finisher of their faith,' there are scarcely any who do not agree in regarding him as the founder and perpetual head of a religious *society* also; as having instituted and designed for permanent continuance, a community or system of communities, to which his disciples, here on earth, were to belong. The religion he introduced was manifestly designed by him, and so understood by his immediate followers, to be a *social* religion; a *combination* of men, who should be members of the body of Christ—living stones of one spiritual temple; 'edifying'—that is, building up—'one another in their faith,' and brethren of one holy family." Such is the character of religion—collecting and uniting mankind in societies or communities.

Now, every branch of the Church, existing as a society, must have some form of organization, some usages of worship, some rules and regulations for her proper and peaceable management, and for the control of her members. In a word, she must have a government; she can not exist without one. And a government must have its modes and measures, its laws and regulations. It implies authority and subordination; a power to rule and an obligation to obey. All this must belong to every society, as a society. Especially must all this belong to every religious society or community which exists as a Church. This subject is so well presented by Archbishop Whately, that I will have no need to apologize for a rather long quotation from him:

"It seems to belong to the very essence of a community, that it should have, 1. *Officers* of some kind; 2. *Rules* enforced by some kind of penalties; and, 3. Some power of admitting and excluding persons as *members*.

"For, 1. Whatever may be the character, and whatever the proposed objects of a regularly-constituted community, officers of some kind are essential to it. In whatever manner they may be appointed, whether by hereditary succession, or by rotation, or by election of any

kind; whatever be the number and titles of them, and whatever the distribution of their functions—all which are matters of detail—officers of some kind every community *must* have.

"2. It seems equally essential to every community, that it should have certain regulations or by-laws, binding on its own members. And if it be not wholly subjected to the control, and regulated by the directions of some extraneous power, but is in any degree an *independent* community, it must so far have power to enact and abrogate—to suspend, alter, and restore by-laws for itself; namely, such regulations, extending to matters intrinsically indifferent, as are not at variance with the enactments of any superior authority. The enforcement, also, of the regulations of a community, by some kind of penalties, is evidently implied by the very existence of regulations. To say of any community, that its laws are valid and binding on its members, is to say that the violators of them may justly be visited with penalties; and to recognize officers, in a community, is to recognize, as among its laws, submission to those officers while in the exercise of their legitimate functions.

"3. Lastly, no less essential to a community

seems to be a power lodged somewhere, of determining questions of membership. Whatever may be the claims or qualifications on which that may depend, even whether the community be a voluntary association, or, as in the case with political communities, one claiming compulsory powers, and whatever may be its purpose, in all cases, the admission to it, of each individual, must be determined by some recognized authority.

"Since, therefore, this point, and also those others above mentioned, seem, naturally and necessarily, to belong to every regular community, since it must, in short, consist of regularly-constituted *members*, subject to certain *rules*, and having certain *officers*, it follows, that whoever directs or sanctions the establishment of a community—as our Lord certainly did in respect of Christian Churches—must be understood as thereby sanctioning those institutions which belong to the essence of a community. To recognize a community as actually having a legitimate existence, or as allowably to be formed, is to recognize it as having *officers*, as having *regulations* enforced by certain penalties, and as admitting, or refusing to admit, *members*.

"When, however, we [do] examine and re-

flect, we can hardly doubt, I think, considering to whom and at what time he was speaking, that our Lord did sanction and enjoin the formation of a permanent religious community or communities, possessing all those powers which have been above alluded to. The power of 'binding and loosing'—that is, enacting and enforcing—and of abrogating or suspending regulations, for a Christian society, was recognized by his promise of the *divine ratification* of those acts—the 'binding and loosing' in heaven. And the expression respecting the 'remitting and retaining of sins,' if it is to be understood—as I think it is—as extending to any thing beyond the power of admitting members into Christ's Church by 'baptism for the remission of sins,' must relate to the enforcement or remission of *ecclesiastical* censures for offenses against a Christian community."

Such, then, being the character of every religious community that exists as a Church, such being the requisites for its proper organization as a Church community, and for the peaceable and well-ordered administration of its government, this question comes up fairly and forcibly: Do the Scriptures reveal and enjoin such regulations and usages as are necessary to the good government and orderly

worship of a religious community as a Church? If they do, it may be granted that the Church is limited to those, and has no discretionary prerogative upon the whole subject. If they do not, then the conclusion follows, beyond the reason or admission of a doubt, that the Church has a discretionary prerogative over these matters. We now, therefore, ask special attention to the question above stated.

There have not been wanting those who have strenuously assumed the position that the Scriptures do reveal and enjoin all that is necessary for the entire government of a Church—basing their assumption upon the necessity of the case. This necessity they have endeavored to maintain by arguments brought from several things, which may be merely stated: From the faithfulness of Christ compared with that of Moses, urging that as Moses instituted an entire form of government for the Church over which he was placed, so "Christ Jesus, who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house," must have done the same for the Church over which he was placed; from the institution of a certain form of government by other legislators who have modeled communities or commonwealths, urging an equal necessity in this case; from the

similitudes employed to represent the Church, urging that these imply such a character of the Church as to require that Christ should institute for it a particular form of government; from the perfections of the Scripture, urging that if an entire and immutable form of gov ernment for the Church is not contained and enjoined therein, they must be imperfect. All this, and I know not what all beside, has been urged in support of the necessity of the case. If any would see a refutation to all this, he may find it to his satisfaction in Bishop Stillingfleet's Irenicum. The following quotation from Bishop Hooker, is entirely sufficient for our present purpose:

"As for those marvelous discourses, whereby they adventure to argue that God must needs have done the thing which they imagine was to be done, I must confess I have often wondered at their exceeding boldness herein. When the question is, whether God has delivered in Scripture—as they affirm he hath—a complete, particular, immutable form of Church polity, why take they that other, both presumptuous and superfluous labor, to prove he should have done it, there being no way, in this case, to prove the deed of God, saving only by producing that evidence wherein he hath done it?

But if there be no such thing apparent upon record, they do as if one should demand a legacy, by force and virtue of some written testament, wherein there being no such thing specified, he pleadeth that there it must needs be, and bringeth arguments from the love and good-will which always the testator bore, imagining that these, or the like proofs, will convict a testament to have that in it which other men can no where, by reading, find. In matters which concern the actions of God, the most dutiful way, on our part, is to search what God hath done, and, with meekness, to admire that, rather than to dispute what he, in congruity of reason, ought to do."

It seems sufficiently plain to us, that the Scriptures do not furnish or enjoin a definite form of government, much less the details of one, as sufficient for the proper and successful management and control of a Church. It is equally plain, that they do not furnish or enjoin such regulations and usages to be observed in divine worship, as are necessary for that worship to be conducted in an orderly and edifying mode. "No such thing is to be found in our Scriptures as a Catechism, or Regular *Elementary Introduction* to the Christian Religion; nor do they furnish us with any thing of the

nature of a Systematic Creed, set of Articles, Confession of Faith, or by whatever other name one may designate a regular, complete Compendium of Christian Doctrines; nor, again, do they supply us with a Liturgy for Ordinary Public Worship, or with Forms for Administering the Sacraments, or for Conferring Holy Orders; nor do they ever give any precise *directions* as to these and other ecclesiastical matters—any thing that at all corresponds to a Rubric or set of Canons." (Whately.)

Where will you find in the Scriptures a draft, according to which a Church community must be planned—a model after which it must be formed? Where will you find therein a detailed account of the different offices of a sufficient Church government? or of the distribution of governmental powers and functions among these offices? or of the rules and regulations to be observed by those who fill the offices? Where will you find therein what shall be or who shall constitute the spiritual judicatories of the Church, either for ministers or members, or in matters of faith or discipline, or of the rules according to which their proceedings shall be conducted? Or can you find detailed in the Scriptures the prudential requisites for the office of the ministry, either for

admission or continuance in that sacred office? or the prudential requisites for Church membership, either for admission or continuance therein? Can you find whether these must be admitted simply upon a profession of the Christian faith and an avowed purpose of piety, or only upon a profession of saving grace or regeneration? whether they must be received to full membership and all its privileges at once, or be placed under instruction, and remain for a season upon trial, as the catechumens of the primitive Church? Can you find therein the prudential rules and forms for the administration of the sacraments—baptism and the Lord's supper? or for the useful and orderly conducting of religious worship? We answer, that these things—all those above alluded to—are not revealed and enjoined in the Scriptures; and, if any answer otherwise, we leave it for them to find and to furnish them.

And it is a fact well worthy of observation, that the sacred writers have omitted to furnish a detailed record of the regulations and usages introduced into the various Churches of their founding, for their government and worship. It is a fact that fully authorizes certain important inferences that should be considered in this connection; and these are drawn so fairly and

set forth so forcibly by Whately, that I can not do better than to furnish brief extracts from him.

"Among the important facts which we can collect and fully ascertain from the sacred historians, scanty, and irregular, and imperfect as are their records of particulars, one of the most important is, *that very scantiness* and incompleteness in the detail, that absence of any full and systematic description of the formation and regulation of Christian communities that has been just noticed; for we may plainly infer, from this very circumstance, the design of the Holy Spirit, that those details, concerning which no precise directions, accompanied with strict injunctions, are to be found in Scripture, were meant to be left to the regulation of each Church, in each age and country.

"These omissions present a complete moral demonstration that the apostles and their followers must have been *supernaturally withheld* from recording a great part of the institutions, instructions, and regulations which must, in point of fact, have proceeded from them—withheld *on purpose* that other Churches, in other ages and regions, might not be led to consider themselves bound to adhere to several formularies, customs, and rules that were of

local and temporary appointment, but might be left to their own discretion in matters in which it seemed best to divine Wisdom that they should be so left.

"The absence of such detailed descriptions and instructions as I have been adverting to, is the more striking when contrasted with the earnest and frequent inculcations we do meet with, of the great fundamental Gospel doctrines and moral duties, which are dwelt upon in so many passages, both generally and in reference to various classes of persons, and various occasions."

We are brought thus to the position—and that position morally demonstrated—that it belongs to the Church, in prudential matters, to make rules and regulations, and to institute usages for herself. Since she exists, according to the plan of her divine Founder, as a community or collection of communities, which must, from the necessity of the case, have rules of government and usages of worship; and since these are not revealed or enjoined in the Scriptures, but purposely and supernaturally omitted, it follows, beyond the reason or admission of a doubt, that she is invested with the prerogative of furnishing all such prudential measures for herself. Certain general principles are

given in Scripture, which must be observed by the Church in the use of this discretionary prerogative. But while acting in view of these principles, and in conformity to their requirements, in making regulations for her own good government, usefulness, and prosperity, and in appointing usages for her orderly and edifying worship, she acts with an entirely sufficient, legitimate authority. This we believe to be the true doctrine upon this subject; and it is one, the truthfulness of which we might support by the most ample and competent authorities of the different ages, and the various branches of the Church of Christ. A few quotations, however, will be all that our limits will allow.

"In things which are determined both by the law of nature and Divine, positive laws, as to the substance and morality of them, but not determined as to all the circumstances belonging to them, it is in the power of lawful authority in the Church of God to determine them, so far as they judge them tend to the promoting the performance of them in due manner, so that not only matters wholly left at liberty as to the substance of them are subject to human laws and constitutions, but even things commanded in the Divine law, in reference to the

manner of performance, if undetermined by the same law which enforces the duty. Thus the setting apart some time for God's worship is a dictate of the natural law; that the first day of the week be that time, is determined under the Gospel; but in what places, at what hours, in what order, decency, and solemnity this worship shall be then performed, are circumstances not determined in Scripture, but only by general rules. As to these, then, so they be done in conformity to those rules, they are subject to human, positive determinations.

"Let us see whether the general rules do require any one form, which rules, in that they are general, can determine nothing of the authority itself as to its particular mode, being intended only for the regulation of the exercise of the authority in which men are placed; and it is an evidence that nothing is particularly determined in this case, when the Spirit of God only lays down such rules for government which are applicable to distinct forms. Otherwise, certainly some rules would have been laid down, which could have been applied to nothing but to that one form. *That none take the office of preaching without a call, nor go without sending*, will equally hold, whether the power of ordination lie in a bishop with presbyters, or

in presbyters acting with equality of power. *That offenders be censured, and complaints made to the Church in case of scandal*, determines nothing to whom the power of jurisdiction doth solely belong, nor what that Church is which must receive these complaints. *That all things be done with decency and order*, doth prescribe nothing wherein that decency lies, nor how far that order may extend, nor yet who must be the judges of that decency and order. *That all be done for edification and the common benefit of the Church*, doth noways restrain his Church's freedom in disposing of itself as to the form of its government, so the aim of the Church be for the better edification of the body of the Church, and to promote the benefit of it." (Stillingfleet.)

"The Scripture lays down certain general rules for the guidance of the Church in regulating externals; such as, 'Let all things be done decently and in order;' 'Let all things be done to edifying;' 'Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God;' 'Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the Church.' Therefore, the Scripture recognizes a power of regulating externals which is guided by general Scriptural rules, not by specific Scriptural enactment or precedent.

"Hence, I conclude that it is lawful—it is not antichristian—to continue, or even institute rites and discipline not mentioned in Scripture, provided they be not opposed to the truths or the principles of Scripture; for, if it be otherwise, all Christians, from the beginning, must have mistaken their own religion, and acted as the enemies of Christ." (Palmer on the Church.)

"And, besides the general principles of Christian faith and morality which they [the apostles] sedulously set forth, they have recorded the most earnest exhortations to avoid 'confusion' in their public worship; to do 'all things decently and in order;' to 'let all things be done to edifying,' and not for vainglorious display; they inculcate the duty of Christians 'assembling themselves together' for joint worship; they record distinctly the solemn sanction given to a Christian community; they inculcate due reverence and obedience to those that 'bear rule' in such a community, with censure of such as 'walk disorderly' and 'cause divisions;' and they dwell earnestly on the care with which Christian ministers should be selected, and on the zeal, and discretion, and blameless life required in them, and on their solemn obligation to 'exhort, rebuke, and

admonish;' yet, with all this, they do not record even the number of distinct orders of them, or the functions appropriate to each, or the degree, and kind, and mode of control they exercise in the Churches.

"While the *principles*, in short, are clearly recognized and strongly inculcated, which Christian communities and individual members of them are to keep in mind and act upon, with a view to the great objects for which these communities were established, the *precise modes* in which these objects are, in each case, to be promoted, are left—one can hardly doubt, studiously left—undefined." (Whately.)

"It is a most valuable part of that blessed *liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free*, that, in his worship, different forms and usages may, without offense, be allowed, provided the substance of the faith be kept entire, and that, in every Church, what can not be clearly determined to belong to doctrine must be referred to discipline, and, therefore, by common consent and authority, may be altered, abridged, enlarged, amended, or otherwise disposed of, as may seem most convenient for the edification of the people, 'according to the various exigencies and occasions.'" (Preface to the Protestant Episcopal Church Prayer-Book.)

"It is not necessary that traditions [customs] and ceremonies be, in all places, one, or utterly alike; for, at all times, they have been diverse, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's word." (Thirty-fourth Article of the Protestant Episcopal Church.)

The Presbyterian Confession of Faith having asserted the "rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable," says, "that, in perfect consistency with the above principle of common right, every Christian Church, or union or association of particular Churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its *communion*, and the qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its internal government which Christ hath appointed."

This principle of discretionary prerogative, thus developed and established, has been very generally received in the different ages of the Christian Church, and adopted and acted upon by the various branches of that Church. Every community, existing by the providence of God, as a Church, is invested with this prerogative; and our Church thus existing, has this power

in common with others; and, while in the prudential and legitimate use of it, all who enter her communion are bound, by Scriptural obligation, to conform to her regulations and usages. This is so plain that none can reasonably doubt it; and this we think a sufficient ground of obligation for our class meetings.

SECTION III.

APPLICATION OF THIS PREROGATIVE TO THE CASE OF CLASS MEETINGS.

May a Church, in the use of this prerogative, require conformity to a prudential usage, as a term of membership, which usage is not essential to Christian character or to salvation? This question makes the plain and fair issue as to our class meetings, and allows the very strongest ground of objection. We hold them merely as prudential. Such Mr. Wesley viewed them; and such have they ever been regarded by our Church. Persons may be true Christians, true Church members, and heirs of salvation, without them. Has our Church then transcended the provisions of this discretionary power, in requiring the observance of such a usage as a term of membership?

This we will say first: Let that Church which is free from such a fault—if it be a

fault—cast the first stone, or bring the first complaint against us. In our judgment, neither a membership nor a place in the ministry of any well-organized, well-disciplined, and well-governed Church now existing, can be obtained without conforming to regulations and usages not clearly revealed and enjoined in the Scriptures, and not essential to true Christian character or to salvation—regulations and usages appointed solely in the use of this discretionary power. Nor do we believe that either could have been done in any such Church, at any time since the days of the apostles. But it may be said that wrongs in other Churches will not correct or justify a wrong in our own; and very true. But we are not essaying to cloak a wrong in our own with the wrongs in others. We aim now simply to show that the consequences of the contrary doctrine to the one we maintain, are such as to require any who would oppose us at least to pause and reflect a little. We do not ourselves consider the mere fact of making such requirements a wrong in any Church. If wrong, it is for other reasons.

The principle which we have sufficiently discussed in the preceding section, fully empowers the Church to make such disciplinary rules and regulations as will have to do, more or less, with

terms of Church membership. Each branch of the Church is authorized, by this discretionary prerogative, limited and directed, of course, by the general principles of Scripture, to determine the prudential regulations and requisites for admission and continuance both in the office of the ministry and in the communion of the Church. It is a mistaken thought that nothing can be required or become obligatory upon Church members, except it be particularly specified in Scripture. If this were so, we must needs have an entire system of Church government, with all its details, all its minutiæ of disciplinary rules and requirements, and all its modes of worship particularly specified and enjoined therein. But this, most plainly, we have not; and, therefore, this is not at all necessary to the obligation of such things. We might as well assume that no enactments of the properly-constituted legislature of a state can be obligatory unless specified and enjoined in the constitution, as to say that no prudential regulations of a Church can be obligatory upon its members unless specified and enjoined in the Scriptures. A constitution is intended to limit and direct the enactments of the legislature, and not to specify and enjoin all the particular acts of legislation, which, indeed, would

supersede the necessity and exclude the lawfulness of one. Now, the general principles of Scripture, in like manner, occupy the place and serve the purposes of a constitution to every true branch of the Church; and the prudential regulations of such a branch of the Church, when made by its proper authorities, and in conformity to these general principles of Scripture, are as really obligatory upon its members as are the constitutional enactments of a civil legislature upon the citizens of a state. Such is the nature, such the bearing and provisions of the principle discussed and established in the preceding section. Such is the principle as recognized and set forth in the various quotations we furnished, as representing the views of various authors and different Churches.

And this same principle, according to these views, authorizes a Church to require conformity to prudential regulations as a term of Church membership. It is a plain principle that, as there is authority to institute prudential regulations, there is authority to require their observance. But more of this hereafter. And as there is authority to require this observance, so there is authority to refuse the privileges of membership, or to exclude from them, all such as refuse this observance. These statements

are logically true, and sufficiently plain to ordinary abilities of apprehension. A Church may, therefore, require the observance of a prudential usage as a term of membership, which usage is not essential to true Christian character or to salvation.

And, as stated above, such requirements are made by various Churches. We believe that they may be found in the economy of all well-governed and well-disciplined Churches of the present and of former ages. One Church may plead that its prudential regulations and usages are better than those of others; that they are more in harmony with the general principles of Scripture and the polity of the apostolic Churches; and that they answer better the purposes of good government and discipline, and are more highly promotive of spiritual growth and prosperity than those of others. But all these are open questions between the various Churches, and not material to the subject now in hand. We are just now considering the simple fact, that various good Churches, yea, that the best Churches, have such regulations and usages as terms of Church membership. I see not how any can deny that they have. I see not why any should desire to deny it, because, in itself, it is a very proper and lawful

Methodist Historical Society Southern California

thing. More than this, it is not necessary thing. Now, take only a cursory view of any well-regulated Church of the present age, and see if you do not find, in such Church, certain usages and regulations for the admission of both members and ministers—certain usages and regulations to be observed, if they are allowed to remain, which are not revealed and enjoined in the Scriptures. With some, a collegiate diploma of bachelor or master of arts, or, at least, authentic testimonials of having gone through a regular course of learning, are required for admission to the work of the ministry; and, further, the study of divinity at least two years, except in extraordinary cases, is required for this work. Then there are various courses of trial also necessary. Now, all this is merely prudential. It is not revealed and enjoined in the Scriptures. It is not necessary to the true work of the ministry; and those who require it will hardly say that it is so revealed and enjoined, or that it is so necessary. And then, further, persons once admitted to the ministry of such Church are required in order to continue therein, to conform to its various prudential regulations and usages; and here the same principle of a discretionary prerogative is applied in the institution of pru-

dential terms for the office of the ministry. Some require the study of a certain course of catechetical instruction and episcopal confirmation, in order to admission to Church membership. Some admit persons to membership directly upon a profession of Christian faith and an avowed purpose of piety, requiring thereafter a season of trial. Others require a profession of grace or regeneration. Some require this to be made to the Church Session. With others it must be made before the whole Church; and every member must have the privilege of a catechist, the place of a spiritual censorship, and a right of consenting before the applicant can be admitted to the privileges of membership. Now, if that which is not enjoined nor revealed in the Scriptures is prudential, plainly all this is so. Then, at least as a general thing, members are required, if not by specific rule, yet in fact, to conform to the various prudential regulations and usages of the Churches to which they belong. This must be so from the necessity of the case. Otherwise, good government can not be maintained; discipline can not be well administered; the affairs of the Church can not be conducted in a decent, orderly, and edifying manner.

There is one particular in which our Church

differs from some others, that it may be proper to observe in this connection. Our Church has a specific, written rule for the exclusion of members who refuse to observe a prudential regulation in the instance of class meetings. Other Churches have not such specific, expressed rules. But here is a difference only in form, and not in fact. The principle is embraced equally by others as by us. Both occupy and act upon the same ground.

And now I repeat it, the Churches of Christ have a sufficient, legitimate authority for these things. While making such regulations as are intended, and, in their best judgment, calculated to promote their prosperity and spiritual good, they are acting upon a prerogative that is Scriptural and authoritative. And they may rightfully require the observance of such measures. They do not regard such prudential regulations and usages as necessary to the office of the ministry, or as essential to true Christian character, or to salvation. Yet they do find them to serve the good order and harmony, the purity and spirituality, the piety and usefulness of the Church. They do find them to contribute to the good character, the efficiency, and usefulness of the ministry. Now, do such Churches transcend their right? Do they un-

lawfully prevent persons, not willing to conform to their usages, from entering their communion, or obtaining a place in their ministry? Or do they unlawfully and oppressively exclude them therefrom, for refusing thereafter to conform to them? If they do, then all good government and well-administered discipline are at an end; all rules and regulations, which preserve their peace and promote their prosperity, and all usages which secure and sustain their modes of decent, and orderly, and edifying worship, are also at an end. If they do not unlawfully or oppressively refuse, or exclude from, the office of the ministry, or the privileges of membership, for refusing such conformity, then the principle we maintain is established. Churches may require the observance of prudential regulations, as a term of membership, which are not essential to true Christian character, or to salvation. And this is an entirely sufficient ground for the defense of the obligation of class meetings, at least so far as their mere prudential character is concerned.

Having thus established the principle of our argument, and shown its general application to Churches, we must apply it yet more directly to our class meetings. And here we must briefly consider their consonance to the general

principles of Scripture, or to the legitimate purposes of a prudential regulation. And thus viewed, we shall find them in no wise repugnant to either, but in full and consenting harmony with both.

In the first place, there is nothing in the Scriptures, in the form of example, of general statement, or specific declaration, to which class meetings are contrary. We have not claimed their Scriptural revelation or injunction. And no more can we allow the position of their Scriptural prohibition. Nor need we detain to discuss this point; for we may not reasonably suppose that any will attempt to maintain, or even assume, such a one.

Nor are class meetings in any wise dissonant to the true principles and duties of religion, or to true Christian experience and deportment. Their exercises are in harmonious and happy agreement with true religious affections and Christian fellowship. That Christians—brethren in Christ, and members of the same family of God, as they are—should come together in intimate, affectionate, and brotherly fellowship; that, thus associated, they should commune together in the freeness and fullness of Christian confidence and love; that they should converse of their graces and practices, their temptations

and deliverances, their declinings and revivings, their trials and triumphs, their joys and sorrows, their purposes and prospects: all this is just in character with their religion, and their relation to each other, as the children of God. And that, thus associated, they should advise and instruct, admonish and exhort, comfort and encourage each other, is equally in character with their religion and Christian relationships. But just such are the exercises and purposes of the class. So that we do find them in striking agreement with the true character of religion.

There are certain general principles of Scripture, which are for the limiting and guiding of the Church in the institution of prudential regulations and usages; such as, "Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God;" "Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the Church;" "Let all things be done decently and in order;" "Let all things be done unto edifying." Such are general principles, for the instruction and direction, not only of individual members, but also of Churches, in measures of a prudential character. These should not be disregarded or trespassed. Each branch of the Church, in honesty of intention, and according to its best judgment, should con-

form its prudential rules and usages to their instruction, and keep them within their limitation. And all this is done in the instance of our class meetings. They were originally intended for the good of our members. They have been so intended ever since. They were adopted, and have been preserved, as a measure for the promotion of the glory of God, and the good order and prosperity of the Church. They were instituted as well adapted, according to the best possible judgment in the case, to the achievement of these objects. And after the experience of many years, our judgment remains the same. Our persuasion of their propriety and usefulness is rather strengthened than weakened. They are, therefore, in accordance with the spirit, and wholly within the provisions of these general principles. And thus they are placed under their full sanction, and rightfully claim thereby a sufficient legitimate warrant. Therefore, our Church is justified in the institution and maintenance of them.

Further, class meetings are in accordance with the legitimate purposes of prudential measures. What are the legitimate measures and purposes of this prudential prerogative with which, as we have seen, every true Church

is invested? We have no occasion now to name them all, or to describe them. But we feel entirely safe in saying that class meetings, as a prudential measure, and the purposes of their institution, are all fully legitimate to this prerogative. If it sanctions or authorizes any such measures and purposes, it fully sanctions or authorizes these. We have before sufficiently explained the character of class meetings, and, therefore, need only recur to the subject now. They are a measure, through which to extend the watch-care of the Church over all the members, for their spiritual assistance and edification, and for the proper administration of discipline. These are objects that the Church ought to regard, the achievement of which she ought earnestly to seek. Here, then, in the institution of class meetings, as a measure for the accomplishment of certain ends, our Church has acted entirely within the provisions of her prudential prerogative. And the requisition of attending class is rightfully enjoined, and stands obligatory upon all who enjoy the privileges of her communion.

We may advance yet a step further. The proper use of this prudential prerogative is not only lawful—it is obligatory. Every religious community, existing, in the providence of God,

as a Church, not only may, but ought to make such regulations, and to institute such usages, as will serve its harmony and good order, its piety and prosperity. A proneness has sometimes been shown, with some, to abandon all conventional regulations of the Church, and to build up religious communities, or Churches, without disciplinary rules and usages to which their members must conform. With what success this has been done, the history of such attempts will show. Well-regulated and orderly societies, or Churches, can not be thus formed and maintained. They may exist, for a season, in a disorderly and incoherent state, without efficiency or usefulness, but will soon come to naught. So it has been, and so it must ever be. Therefore, as the details of a sufficient Church government are not furnished, it is the duty of every true Church to frame and adopt for herself such rules and usages as will secure her own good order and spiritual growth, and enable her to achieve the great objects of her existence. Hence, when it is said that all things should be done to the glory of God, and that all things should be done decently and in order, and to edification, there is more than the conveyance of a prerogative; there is the imposition of an obligation. And further, any

Church, having, in obedience to this obligation, instituted such regulations as may promise to secure her good order and prosperity, her spiritual growth and usefulness, and, especially, having found that they very successfully accomplish these objects, ought to maintain them. Their maintenance is as much a duty as their appointment. We do not know of any principle in the Scriptures that would justify a Church in voluntarily dispensing with a prudential regulation, when, at the same time, in her best judgment, it was promoting her spiritual good, and enabling her to accomplish the objects of her existence as a Church. Who can show us such a principle? Not one.

How, then, upon this very plain and sure ground, stands the case with our class meetings? A necessity was seen and felt, at an early period, among us, for some such measure as a remedy to sore and wasting evils. It seemed that the work to which our founders were called, in the providence of God, could not proceed without it. It was then that the institution of class meetings was embraced, in honesty of purpose, as the measure needed, and in good faith of their appropriateness and efficiency. And they have ever greatly promoted the good order and spiritual edification—the

piety and prosperity of our communion. Such were their results when first instituted. Great good was done in ascertaining and reforming such as walked disorderly; or, if they proved incorrigible, in separating them from the societies, so as to avoid the infection and scandal of their wicked ways. Great good was also accomplished in promoting the Christian union and spiritual growth of the various members. Such is the account of them given by Mr. Wesley himself. And such have continued to be their results, through all the history of our Church, from that period down to the present time. And, tell me now, what principle of Scripture is there that would, after all this, justify our Church in dispensing with them? Most plainly, there is none. Having felt their necessity, and ascertained their usefulness, it is her duty to maintain them. All such regulations may be modified or amended, changed or dispensed with, as it may be ascertained that some change would improve their usefulness, or that they fail to answer any good ends. But the case is wholly different where they prove themselves abundantly useful. In this case they may not be dispensed with. It is, therefore, not within the prerogative of the highest authorities of the Church, nor in that of all the

Church combined, to dispense with them. Where, then, is the right of any individual member to claim an immunity from the obligation to attend them? Where is the right of the individual minister or pastor to dispense with the requisition of attendance? It is sufficient to propound these questions. We may safely risk the answer with those who read them.

Such, then, is the prerogative of the Church in matters of a prudential character—such her duty to act upon that prerogative—such her obligation to maintain such measures as she finds to be wise and good. She must make and maintain such regulations as are requisite to the accomplishment of her legitimate objects—such as will secure decency, and order, and edification. Otherwise, all will be inefficiency, dishonor, disorder, and destruction. And any Church that should decline the institution of such measures, or, having ascertained their usefulness, should dispense with them, fails to do what is plainly required of her. Who, then, can reasonably doubt of the rightfulness of our class meetings? Who can dispute the lawfulness of requiring attendance upon them? To dispense with this requirement would constitute the betrayment of a high trust—the abuse of a high prudential preroga-

tive—the sacrifice of a measure involving alike our duty and our interest. Let not this be done. Let class meetings be maintained, as legitimate in their obligation, and rich in blessings to the Church.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OBLIGATION OF CLASS MEETINGS: SECOND GENERAL ARGUMENT. FURTHER ARGUMENTS.

SECTION I.

GROUND OF THE SECOND GENERAL ARGUMENT EXPLAINED AND ESTABLISHED: DESIGN OF CLASS MEETINGS.

WE base the second general argument for the obligation of class meetings upon their design. We shall have nothing here to do with their mere mode any further than briefly to consider its adaptation to certain great and important ends to be achieved through this measure. But the present section will be occupied in explaining and establishing the principles or the ground of the argument.

An institution may be obligatory because of that which it embodies and provides, or because of its legitimate objects, while its mere mode or form may be indifferent: indifferent, we mean, so far as the question of obligation is concerned. This not only may be, but often is, the case. It will not be difficult to make the truth of this position appear.

Do the Scriptures enjoin obedience to the civil government as a duty? Do they require this as obligatory upon all resident within the limits of each and every civil commonwealth? Most plainly they do. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers; for there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God." Rom. xiii, 1, 2. "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme, or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil-doers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well-doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men." 1 Pet. ii. 13–15. So plainly is the duty of obedience to civil government taught in the Scriptures. So fully, therefore, is it a duty. But what then? Has God ordained and authorized the various forms of civil government? Has he made their mere modes obligatory? This would be a defenseless position—one which the reader will not attempt to maintain, nor even assume. Neither a monarchy, nor a republic, nor any other form of civil government is, of divine right, obligatory upon its subjects, so far as the mere form

itself is concerned. If the obligation of civil government pertains to its mere mode or form, the presumption is fair that the duty of obedience is limited to some one government of a particular form, as ordained of God. It must be limited to one so ordained. Otherwise, he must have ordained not only one, but the various forms of government which now exist, and also those which have heretofore existed. But plainly this is not the case; and, further, if there is one, and only one, particular form of government ordained and enjoined of God, then all others are wrong and inadmissible; their laws are a tyranny, and their requisitions an oppression; and it hence follows that all those living under such governments, and even rendering obedience to them, are neglecting, and must neglect, the duty of obedience to civil government, till placed under that particular form of God's ordaining. But any position involving such consequences is plainly false. There is no form of civil government divinely appointed. The powers, that is, the legitimate authorities, of government are the ordinance of God; the modes for the investiture and exercise of these powers are the ordinance of men. This distinction is fairly made in the two passages of Scripture quoted

in this connection. Then it is, in every case, the government itself, as ordained of God, that is obligatory, and not its mere modes, which are determined of men. While, therefore, neither a monarchy, nor a republic, nor any other form of government is, by Divine right, obligatory upon its subjects so far as the form itself is concerned, yet either is, by Divine right, obligatory as embodying and furnishing civil government. But it is the government, and not its mere form, that is obligatory.

Again: is Church membership a duty? This the reader will not deny. But what then? Have the various forms of Church government existing among us each a Divine right? Has any one such a right for the mere mode of its polity? If the duty of Church membership pertains to the mere mode or form of ecclesiastic polity adopted by any one denomination, it is necessarily limited to such one, and all others are excluded therefrom. Otherwise, God has appointed the various forms of Church government now existing. Whether a Church recognizes and adopts three orders in its ministry, or two, or one; whether its ministry shall be itinerant or settled; whether it shall admit or exclude lay representation; these, and a great many other things, are all questions

aside from the grounds of obligation to Church membership. All things essential to a Church may be embraced under all these diversities in the forms of government; and where the essentials are embraced, and all things plainly repugnant to the Scriptures are excluded, there is a true Church, whatever its form of polity. Otherwise, the duty of Church membership is an obligation only to a Church of some particular mode of government; and it would hence follow that all Churches of a different polity are not Churches of Christ at all, and that all in their communion are without the Church, and are neglecting, and must neglect, the duty of Church membership, till united with the one of that particular form of government ordained of God. But will the reader admit this? Is he at all prepared to admit it? Surely not. Such a doctrine might do for Papists; but it will not do for Protestants. Here, then, as in regard to the obligations of civil government, the duty of Church membership pertains not to any form of ecclesiastic government, but to the Church itself as embodied and furnished under some suitable form.

Now, we are thus brought plainly to see the truth of the proposition above made, that an institution may be, and often is, obligatory,

because of that which it embraces and provides, or because of its legitimate objects, while its mere mode or form is indifferent to the question of obligation; and none the less so because the mere form is thus indifferent. This is the principle we wished here to establish. The use of the principle will be seen in the progress of this argument. We next proceed to consider and settle three questions which involve certain points as to the legitimate rights and duties of a Church.

1. Is it the right and duty of a Church to seek to ascertain the religious state and deportment of her members? It seems wholly unnecessary to argue such a question as this. It must receive an affirmative answer from all who understand its import. Such must be the right and duty of every true Church, because she is highly responsible for the salvation of her members, and must do all she can to secure it. And she can not meet these responsibilities and accomplish this object without obtaining frequent and, as far as may be, accurate information of their religious state and manner of life. Without such information, how can the strong bear the infirmities of the weak? how can we bear one another's burdens? how can that which is lame be healed rather than turned

out of the way? or how can the spiritual restore, in the spirit of meekness, any one overtaken in a fault? All this could not be done; and yet all of it is imposed as a duty upon the Church. She must, therefore, seek such information as will enable her rightly to perform these solemn and important duties. She must have such information in order rightly to feed the flock of Christ. Otherwise, she will not be able to render that instruction, that admonition and reproof, that encouragement and help, which, in many instances, are necessary to their continuance and growth in grace; and what is thus necessary to the Church for the right performance of her obligations to her members, it is her right and duty to seek.

Again: this right and duty of the Church grow out of others—her right and duty to suspend or separate unworthy members from her communion. These are duties plainly taught in the Bible. But how can the Church perform them unless she know the religious life of her members? Plainly in no just and adequate degree. It follows, then, most conclusively, that it is the right and duty of a Church to seek to ascertain the religious state and deportment of her members.

2. Is it the prerogative of a Church to insti-

tute some suitable mode through which to ascertain the Christian character and conduct of her members? Such must be her prerogative, unless there be some mode divinely appointed. But who will pretend that this has been definitely done? Romanists may plead the Divine institution of their confessional, but they attempt its defense in vain. Nor does it at all answer the purpose of which we are speaking. Plainly there is no definite mode laid down or enjoined in the Bible for the ascertainment of Christian experience and character. There are plain fruits, distinctly-marked characteristics, infallible tests, of both. These are divinely revealed and noted. But the particular mode in which these shall be brought under the observation of the Church, and so examined as to give her due information of the character of her members, is not divinely appointed. This is a matter which, like many others, is left to the judgment and discretion of the Church herself; and as she may not omit the duty of seeking to know the religious character of her members, it hence follows most conclusively that it is her prerogative and duty to institute some suitable mode in which to seek such knowledge.

3. Is it the duty of members to allow the

Church to which they may belong an opportunity for information as to their religious character through such suitable mode as she may institute? This is very evident. It is a duty correlative to the duty of the Church to seek such information, and also to her prerogative to appoint such suitable mode. The one follows necessarily from the other. This right and duty of the Church imply a corresponding obligation upon the individual members; and it follows, with full certainty, that it is their duty to submit to, and observe any such measure which she may institute. Otherwise, they resist, and may of right resist, a measure indispensable to proper Church government, and thus make it impracticable for the Church to discharge her duties, either to her members, or to herself, or to her divine Founder and Head. Nothing further is here necessary for the illustration of this point.

Now, let us bring the principle first established and those involved in the three questions considered together, that we may fully exhibit and establish the ground of the present argument. Any measure, whether of civil or ecclesiastical government, which makes suitable and necessary provision for the great duties and the legitimate purposes and ends of such gov-

ernment, derives its obligation from the duties and objects for which it provides. Here the mere form of the institution is indifferent to the question of authority. It has other and higher grounds of obligation. It stands sustained and sanctioned by the full obligation of its great, legitimate purposes. It is obligatory to the full extent of the authority and obligation of the duties and ends for the performance and achievement of which it provides. In the instance of civil government, any measure thereof which is suitable and necessary to the duties and legitimate objects and ends of good government, is sanctioned by all the authority and obligation of the government itself; and such measure is thus sanctioned entirely irrespective of its mere form. It derives its obligation from the legitimacy and obligation of those things for which it provides. It is obligatory because of their obligation, and is sanctioned and sustained by an equal authority; and we may not, in such case, plead an immunity because we may disapprove of the mere form or mode of such measure. That is an indifferent matter. The obligation is in the legitimacy and authority of the ends provided for; and the measure is thereby clothed with the highest authority, and it is as much our

duty, by the will of God, to conform to the modes of such measure as to obey civil government itself. Now, the case is just such in the instance of Church government. Christ instituted a Church to exist as an organized community or communities, and imposed upon it, or upon them, the performance of certain duties and the achievement of certain ends. These duties and ends are obligatory by the very highest authority. But, in many instances, each Church is left to her own institution of the measures through which to perform these duties and legitimate purposes. In many instances, some measure or measures are necessary, and she must institute them or come short of the divinely-appointed ends of her existence. Now, in any such case, a suitable and necessary measure which any true Church institutes derives its obligations, not from its mere form, but from the legitimacy and obligation of those things for which it provides. It is obligatory because of their obligation, and stands sustained and sanctioned by an equal authority. Such measure being necessary and suitable to the great ends of Church organization, becomes thereby obligatory by all the authority of Church government itself; and the members of any true Church are as much obliged

to the duty of conformity to such measures of her institution as they are to the duty of Church membership. If this is not so, then all sufficient Church government is at an end. But we have seen that each Church must have due information of the character of her members in order to the performance of her responsible duties, and the achievement of the legitimate ends of her existence. We have seen, also, that it is left to the prerogative of each Church to institute some suitable measure in order to such information Therefore, any suitable measure instituted as a necessary provision for such information, in order to these great duties and legitimate objects, derives full sanction from these duties and objects. It invests itself with the fullness of their authority. It stands obligatory by that Divine authority which has instituted the Church for the performance of these duties and the achievement of these ends.

SECTION II.

OBLIGATION OF CLASS MEETINGS SECURELY PLACED UPON THE GROUND OF THEIR DESIGN.

We proceed now to place the obligation of class meetings upon the ground established in the previous section. And we must here recur

to their design, or to the ends for which they provide. They constitute a measure through which the Church seeks to acquire due information of the character of her members, in order that she may suitably and seasonably instruct, edify, encourage, exhort, admonish, reprove, or reclaim them, or, in case of necessity, apply the proper discipline in their exclusion. Now, we have already seen the legitimacy and obligation of these things. They are duties and objects which every true Church must accomplish in some way. They are divinely intended and enjoined in the very institution of a Church. We have also seen the full and sufficient ground of obligation for any suitable measure through which a Church provides for the performance of these duties and the achievement of these ends. Our Church has made this provision in the institution of her class meetings; and the most that here remains to be done is to consider their suitableness to the ends of their institution. If thus suitable, they are, because of the ends for which they provide, fully obligatory upon the members of our communion.

Do class meetings constitute a suitable measure for the ascertainment of Christian character in order to the ends for which that ascer-

tainment is sought? It seems to us that no better mode could be instituted. They served these purposes well from the very first. All the members were hereby brought under the immediate watch-care of the Church. "By this means it was quickly discovered if any of them lived in any known sin. This division of the people and exclusion of those that walked disorderly, without any respect of persons, were helps which few other communities had." (Mr. Wesley.) Such were then, and such have continued to be, their suitableness and efficiency. But let us consider the subject a little more in detail.

The purpose and the business of these meetings is to inquire directly into the religious state of the several members. Is it objected that the statements of members as to their religious experience can not be relied upon? But why not? It is not, by any means, the only instance in which the personal statements of the individual are relied upon as evidence of Christian character. It is a custom prevailing more or less with all denominations who hold the doctrine of experimental religion; and class meetings, we urge, afford the very best opportunities for information upon this subject. All the circumstances are most favorable to an

honest and understanding statement of Christian experience. Each member, by frequently hearing the experience of others, understands the more clearly his own, and, hence, is the better prepared to present it in a true light. Further, it must be, from the circumstances, a subject of much reflection with the leader—one upon which he is frequently hearing the statements of others. He becomes, therefore, well instructed himself, and is thus the better prepared to examine into and to ascertain the gracious state of those committed to his care.

Further, class meetings, in pursuance of their design, afford the most favorable facilities for knowing the deportment of the various members. Hence, various Scripture tests are instituted, various duties are specified and laid down as rules for the government of the life of the members, in view of which their Christian character is to be judged and determined. The member is to do no harm, to avoid evil of every sort. Under this head many prevalent evils are specified as a summary of the things to be avoided. He is also to do good in every possible way to the souls and to the bodies of men. Under this head many duties are specified as a summary of the good works that should be performed. He must also attend

upon the ordinances of God, or the divinely-instituted means of grace. Here are sufficient tests. As a man's life conforms, or does not conform, to these rules, so is he religious or irreligious. And how shall it be so readily known whether it does so conform or not, as through our class meetings? The life of the several members is brought directly under the watch-care, not only of the leader, but also to a great extent under that of all the members of the same class. At the same time, the general oversight and watch-care of the Church, through her pastor and members, are just as great and vigilant as though there were no classes at all.

And how, otherwise, is a Church to ascertain the Christian character of her members, than in these two ways: by a strict examination of their experience, and by a vigilant oversight of their manner of life? If any can show us a more Scriptural, or better way, we will be glad not only to see, but also to embrace and adopt it. And how can this inquiry and oversight be better, or more appropriately and efficiently performed, than through the provisions of our class meetings? If any can show us a more Scriptural, or a more appropriate and efficient measure, we will again be glad not only to see,

but also to embrace and adopt it. Of this however, we have no hope.

And does it not seem necessary that some such measure as our class meetings should be instituted, in order that a Church may have the requisite information as to the character and wants of her members? The history of the various Churches will show that the mere enrollment of the name upon the journal of the Church, or the occasional, or even regular attendance of the member upon the ordinances and services of religion, in many instances, is not a sufficient certificate or guarantee of true Christian life. Scattered abroad in community, and unobserved by the Church, in the varied walks and conflicts of social and business life, their religious character must in a great measure be unknown to her. We affirm not this of all. Some will be observed and known. Nevertheless, too many will be unknown. In many instances, members may absent themselves mainly from the ordinances of religion and the worship of God, long before their absence is known. They may thus perish for the want of that instruction and encouragement which the Church might have rendered had she known their state. Surely there is great advantage where the society is divided into small compa-

nies, and each company placed under the immediate watch-care of some judicious member. This provision is as important to the Church, and serves all the good purposes of management and edification, of training and discipline, as the division and distribution of an army under the various subordinate officers.

Does it not follow, now, from the principles settled in the previous section, that attendance upon class may be required as a term of Church membership? Remember, we do not here argue their obligation, as means of grace, though we consider them invaluable in that view. We urge not here any obligation because of their mere form. We rest their obligation upon the ground of their design—the great legitimate ends for which they provide. They are obligatory because they constitute a suitable and necessary measure whereby the Church may acquire and maintain a sufficient knowledge of the state of her members, so as properly to minister to their edification, and exercise a suitable discipline over them. If the member has a right to refuse to the Church an opportunity for such requisite information through this measure, he has the same right to refuse it through any and every other measure which she may institute, and hence to hinder

her from the performance of important duties enjoined by her founder. But he has no such rights, so directly at war with the rights and duties of the Church herself. We do not excuse a man from obedience to civil government, though he may not approve of its modes of policy, or methods of operation. We do not, on this ground, excuse him from the duty of Church membership. The Lord himself does not excuse him. Though he might disapprove of the modes and measures of all civil, and all ecclesiastical governments that exist, still his obligations to obedience to civil government, and his duty to Church membership remain the same. The ground of obligation is not, in either case, in the mere form or mode. This may be indifferent to obligation in itself, while the great principles which it furnishes, and the great ends for which it provides, are and must be obligatory. Such is the case with our class meetings. They are indifferent, in their mere form, to the question of obligation. At the same time they are obligatory by the most competent authority upon all the members of our communion, because of the great duties and purposes for which they most suitably and efficiently provide. From these duties and purposes, which we have sufficiently explained,

they derive full and legitimate authority. We have, also, sufficiently explained the mode in which they derive this authority. And thus our second general argument is sufficiently established and brought to a sure conclusion.

SECTION III.

FURTHER ARGUMENTS.

We might here close the argument for the obligation of class meetings as a term of Church membership. But as this part of the subject, upon which we are writing, is most important, it will not be improper to offer a few thoughts further. We especially desire to treat this part fully and fairly, and to allow full place for any grounds of objection that may be urged against it. We proceed, then, with some further observations.

It was previously made sufficiently plain, that all good and well-ordered Churches do more or less require certain things of a prudential character in order to membership, which are not revealed or enjoined in the Scriptures, and which are not essential to Christian character or to salvation. Now, if a Church may or require any such thing, it follows that any person, that all persons, are excused from joining any one of them—excused from joining

any at all. Moreover, those within them would be excusable in leaving them, and thus utterly destroying them all. But no one can soberly admit this. It is the duty of every person to unite with, and to continue in the communion of some Church, where he may publicly profess the name of Christ, attend upon the divinely-instituted ordinances of religion, and worship God. And this secures the principle of the lawfulness of requiring, as a term of Church membership, the observance of a mere prudential measure, which is not essential to Christian character, or to salvation.

Again: do Churches, by thus requiring such non-essentials, cease to be true Churches? If they do, then, as all Churches require, more or less, such things, the whole Church becomes extinct; yea, never existed. But if they do not—as plainly they do not—thus cease to be true Churches, then it is the duty of every person to unite with, and remain in some one. If such is not his duty, then the Church may exist, and yet a membership in it be a matter of no obligation. But as this can not be, as a membership is a matter of sacred obligation, we are brought again to the same conclusion of the lawfulness of prudential requisites as a term of Church membership. And the obligation of

class meetings is hereby fully established. No prudential regulation of any Church is, for its consonance to Scripture and religion, or to the principles and purposes of a Church, or for the many great and good ends which it achieves, more defensible than class meetings. If any prudential requisite is lawful, they are lawful.

Moses followed the judicious advice of Jethro, in dividing the people of Israel into thousands, and hundreds, and fifties, and tens, and in placing over these divisions men of truth and godliness. Here, so far as appears from the sacred narrative, was a merely-prudential arrangement, but one that answered an invaluable purpose. I know it might be inferred, though it is not at all stated, that Moses had God's approval of this plan. But what less can we say of Mr. Wesley in the division of his societies into classes, and the appointment of men of truth and godliness over them? Surely, for all this there were very clear and full indications of God's approval. He was led, rather by the providence of God than by any purpose or plan of his own, to the adoption of this measure. And the Divine approval came upon it in the form of rich and abundant spiritual blessings. And thus this approval has continued to be given to the present time.

Since, then, they have been thus blessed and sanctioned of God, they are rightfully enjoined upon our members.

Let us, in this connection, glance at the subject in its practical bearings. A person applies to our Church, or to any other evangelical communion, for membership. He understands that, either with the expressed or implied agreement of conformity to the general usages of said Church, he may be received. But he objects to certain regulations thereof. He urges that they are, and even confessed by the Church to be, merely prudential, not specifically revealed and enjoined in the Scriptures, and not essential to true Christian character, or to salvation, and, therefore, should not be required of him. What now? Should these things all be suspended, in his case, or changed for his accommodation? They exist, let it be remembered, by appointment of the authorities of said Church, and by the hearty approval of the great body of its membership. In the judgment of both, they are in agreement with the general principles and discipline of a proper Church institution, and efficiently promotive of the good order, spirituality, and prosperity of their Church. In such a case, surely a Church should not change or dispense with its well-

established, well-approved, and well-operating regulations and usages, for the accommodation of the mere private opinion or taste of any one that might so apply for membership. To do so would be to substitute his mere opinion, or taste, or prejudice, or whatever it may be, for the godly judgment of the Church, which is sanctioned by a full and well-tried experience. Besides, there would be no end for such changes or suspensions. And if granted for such reasons, the general prudential regulations and usages of every well-regulated Church would be totally unsettled—totally destroyed.

The same remarks will equally apply to those already within the communion of the different Churches. One person becomes dissatisfied with the regulations and usages of the Church to which he belongs. Now, suppose they ought to be, and are changed according to his wishes. But it may be that the next day he will be as much dissatisfied as ever; or if he is not, some one else will be. Now, it is plain that these suspensions or changes of rules and customs should not be made at the instance and because of the opinion or wish of individual members. Such regulations and usages as have been found profitable for good order, and edification, and spirituality, and prosperity, ought

to remain according to the will, and for the good of the body of the Church-communion in which they have been instituted. Otherwise, the affairs of no Church can be conducted decently, orderly, and to edification.

Now, such specially is the practical bearing of this subject in its application to our Church in the instance of class meetings. They are so interwoven into our whole system of Church polity, so pertinent and important to our economy, as to be quite indispensable to the order and success of the system itself. No prudential measure of any Church is or can be—such is our view—more important to the good order, the spirituality, and prosperity of such Church than class meetings are to ours. No prudential measure has more effectually promoted and secured these great interests. They have the highest sanction of our Church authorities, and the hearty approval of the great body of our members. They have wrought most successfully, for good, with us, through our whole history. Ought we, then, to suspend or change them at the instance of individuals who may desire a membership with us, but who may refuse their consent to the observance of this usage? Or ought we to grant an immunity from the requisition to attend class to such

within our Church as may refuse so to do? Surely we ought to do none of those things. Such a course would be to break up our system of Church economy. Its order and efficiency, its spirituality and power, its usefulness and prosperity would be at an end. And it must, in view of all this, be lawful for us to maintain the rule which requires attendance upon class.

But if the principles we advocate be acted upon, may not Christians be refused, or excluded from, the privileges of Church membership? We can not deny but that they possibly may be. Yet we are fully persuaded they very rarely will be. But what alternative have the Churches in such a case? Either they must so frame their regulations and usages as to suit all, or they must not require the observance of them, either in receiving or retaining members, or they must be liable to the possibility of refusing or excluding true Christians from the privileges of Church membership. Now, the first is manifestly impossible, and, therefore, out of the question. And it needs no argument to show which they should choose of the other two. For if they should not require the observance of such regulations and usages, either in receiving or retaining members, they would cause hundreds to be deprived of their

membership, while in the other mode they would not put in jeopardy the membership of even one.

Then where is the responsibility, even if true Christians are refused or excluded from the privileges of Church membership? Rights of conscience excepted, it is one of the plainest principles, that, in all communities, individual rights and opinions must be subordinate to the judgment and measures of the community. In no case is this more so than in Church communities; for what is this plain principle but a principle of good order? and no where should this be so complete as in a Church. And tell me now, what right of reason or revelation has an individual, though he be a true Christian, to claim to be received and retained in the communion of a Church, and at the same time to disregard its general prudential regulations and usages? Plainly, no right at all. And if in such case, and for such reason, he is deprived of membership, the responsibility is wholly his own. It is his duty to conform to the Church, and not the duty of the Church to conform to him.

And the Scriptures are in agreement with the principles we advocate. They plainly inculcate the duty of subordination to the gen-

eral disciplinary regulations and usages of the Church. "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you," Heb. xiii, 17. Now, this obedience to the ruling authorities of the Church can not be duly rendered unless the general rules and regulations thereof be observed; and yet this obedience is enjoined as a duty upon all. Further, the disorderly are severely reprehended, and the Church enjoined to withdraw from such, or to refuse them Christian fellowship. "Now, we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly," 1 Thess. v, 14. "Now, we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition he received of us," 2 Thess. iii, 6. It is not denied that these passages condemn other disorders than those which consist in the violation or disregard of the prudential usages and regulations of a Church, yet they must include these, unless their application be unduly limited; and we have before had occasion to quote passages, the full requirements of which can not be met without an observance of the pru-

dential regulations and customs of the Church; such as, "Let all things be done decently and in order;" and, "Let all things be done unto edifying." There can not be either decency, or order, or edification in any Church where such rules and usages are allowed to be disregarded.

We think now the position fully established that our Church may rightfully require attendance upon class as a term of membership. If any true Christian can not join us because of this requisition, we leave him at full liberty to go elsewhere. This is all we have to do with him. If any such among us become so dissatisfied with the requisition that they can not obey it, let them quietly withdraw, and go elsewhere. But if they claim the privileges of membership, and yet persist in the willful neglect of class, let them, after due forbearance, entreaty, and admonition, be laid aside. The responsibility is wholly theirs. They are yet free to go elsewhere. If they do, well; but if they do not, they have voluntarily, and upon their own responsibility, deprived themselves of the privileges of Church membership.

Two observations may be proper, in concluding the subject of this and the preceding chapters, as a guard against wrong inferences as to the character and position in which we have

viewed a true Church of Christ, or from the general principles upon which we have based our arguments.

As to the character and position of a true Church, we have viewed every such one as invested, according to the will of God, with certain rights and prerogatives of self-government, of instituting and establishing, in harmony with the general principles of the Gospel, rules and regulations for her own orderly management and edification, and of requiring the observance of them upon the part of all who are permitted to enter or to remain in her communion. Now, it may not be inferred from this that there is conceded to any Church a rightful character of selfishness, or that she may rightfully assume a position of exclusiveness. She is thus invested with such right and prerogative, not for any ends of her own, either of arrogance, or pride, or oppression, but only that she may the more fully achieve the designs of divine Benevolence in her institution—designs which specially propose and seek the spiritual elevation and happiness, the present and eternal salvation of mankind; and wherever a Church does in fact, or even assumes a right to disregard the spiritual good either of those within or of those without her pale, she is guilty of

daring and impious arrogance, and may not longer expect the favor and smiles of God. Alas! that this should have been so often done! But too often has the Church sought a position of haughtiness and tyranny, seeking her own aggrandizement, her own wordly pomp and display, and, at the same time, dealing out anathemas against all who might differ from her, or dispute her claims. How far away is all this from her true mission of mercy! The spirit of Christ should be her spirit. Her aim, like his, should be to seek and to save the lost, to proclaim good tidings to all, and to welcome home all who return in the spirit of the Gospel.

Again: it may not be inferred from the rights and prerogatives of the Church, whereby she may make suitable rules and regulations, for the purposes of good government and orderly and edifying worship, that there is therein a sufficient warrant for all the regulations and usages instituted in any and every Church. Many of these tend neither to decency nor order. They in no wise minister to edification; nor do they promote the spirituality or prosperity of the Church. They rather hinder or destroy both. Here, again, the Church has too often erred. She has burdened herself with rites and superstitions that have enslaved and

corrupted her members. Now, all such things are plainly repugnant to the Scriptures—to the general principles which, in all such things, must ever be our limit and our guide. They are, therefore, not only not authorized, but plainly prohibited by the word of God. No prudential regulation may rightfully be instituted or maintained which is contrary to the Scriptures—none which hinders or opposes rather than promotes the cause of Christ.

CHAPTER V.

OBJECTIONS TO CLASS MEETINGS CONSIDERED: PRUDENCE REQUISITE IN EXCLUDING FOR NON-ATTENDANCE.

SECTION I.

OBJECTIONS TO CLASS MEETINGS CONSIDERED.

WE do not propose an elaborate consideration of objections. We have thus far aimed so to discuss and present the subject of class meetings as both to anticipate and to obviate the main objections that are alleged against them; and this same course will be pursued in the parts that remain. Yet some notice of them may be proper in this place. Some of those that we shall notice are such as would be urged rather by those out of our communion than by those in it. Others are such as would be urged rather by our own members than by others. We do not, however, deem it important definitely to note any division of these classes. We shall treat them successively as arranged under one general head of objections.

First, then, it has been much objected against class meetings that they are not Scriptural. If

by this it is meant that they are not specifically revealed or enjoined in the Scriptures, the objection is allowed. This has before been fully conceded. But if it be meant that they are contrary to the Scriptures, or that, because they are not specifically revealed or enjoined, they are, therefore, unlawful, this objection is denied as wholly invalid. We have had previous occasion sufficiently to show that class meetings are not in any wise repugnant to the Scriptures, or to religion, or to the character and duties of a true Church of Christ, but in full harmony with all. The objection we are considering, therefore, requires no further notice in the sense of their being contrary to Scripture. Are class meetings unlawful because not specifically revealed or enjoined in the Scriptures? Here again we might refer to the arguments which we have offered in support of their obligation as entirely sufficient to show that they are not for such reason unlawful. Yet we embrace this as a suitable occasion for a few further remarks.

First: if class meetings are unlawful, it is wrong to attend them. They can not be attended with a good, enlightened conscience. No authority or sanction of any Church can make that right and lawful which, by the prin-

ciples of revelation and religion, is rendered wrong and unlawful. Such is the logical consequence of this sense of the objection. But can any one attempt soberly to maintain the position that it is wrong to attend class? that it is a violation of an enlightened, good conscience? Surely not. Or, if for this reason it is wrong to attend class, for the very same reason it is wrong either to become or to remain a member of any Church now existing; for, as we have before seen, you can not do either in any Church without conforming to prudential regulations, not specifically instituted in the Scriptures. Concerning all such prudential matters, we have no occasion for more than two inquiries: Are they contrary to the Scriptures? and, Do they promote the good of the Church in which they are instituted? If they are not contrary to the Scriptures, and if they do promote the good of the Church, we can see no reason—indeed there is none—why we may not lawfully, and with a good, enlightened conscience, observe them.

The next remark is, that there is a sufficient reason, with a good, enlightened conscience, why we should observe such usages and regulations. Every true Church, as we have sufficiently shown, is invested with the prerogative

of arranging such matters for herself, in conformity to the general principles of revelation. They are, therefore, of legitimate authority and binding obligation when so arranged. In every society there must be, in order to its existence and good government, a ruling or governing power—one invested with the prerogative of making and enforcing necessary and suitable rules and regulations. And this, as we have seen, is pre-eminently so with a religious society or Church community. We have no occasion now to inquire where or what this ruling power is, but only to apply the principle to the case of our class meetings. These meetings, so greatly subservient of the spiritual good of our communion, exist among us by appointment of the recognized and acknowleged authorities of our Church, and also by the full consent and hearty approval of the great body of our ministers and members. It is plain, therefore, that this ruling power, existing by the will of God in our Church, as it does in every Church raised up and existing through his providence, is somewhere embraced in this full range of our acknowledged authorities, and the great body of our ministers and members. Class meetings, therefore, do exist among us by the very highest and fullest authority of our

Church. The law of their institution and obligation is as much a law with us as is the constitution of the United States the organic law of the national government. We may, therefore, with sufficient reason, apply to all the members of our communion, in regard to attending class, these words of St. Paul: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves." There is no case to which they are more applicable. A refusal to observe this regulation of our Church is specially an instance of disobedience, not only because of the full authority that sanctions and requires it, but more particularly because this is emphatically *the measure for the proper administration of discipline* with us. Whoever, therefore, of our members refuses to attend class, throws himself beyond or without our special provision for the maintenance of good government in the proper application of discipline. How plainly, then, is this an act of disobedience! It is as one offense whereby the offender is guilty of all offenses of disorder. It is in effect to claim an entire immunity from the government of the Church. Now, connect all these things with the solemn injunction, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves," and tell me, then, is not here a reason with the con-

science of every Methodist why he should, if he can, attend class? I will risk the answer with the reader.

Another objection is, that class meetings are mainly a peculiarity of Methodism, that the Church of Christ long did without them, and that other leading denominations do without them now. A few words will sufficiently obviate this objection. If any, as Methodists, urge this as a reason against class meetings, they need, by no means, stop with them. Our regular and specifically-formed itinerancy, our peculiar form of episcopacy, our presiding eldership, and our particular mode of receiving members—not to name other things—are quite as much peculiarities of Methodism as class meetings; and we have no more reason to object to them than to any one of the others, simply upon the ground of their peculiarity to us. And as for others who may urge this objection, we have only to say, that we have no knowledge of any reason why we should conform our peculiarities to theirs rather than that they should conform theirs to ours; and, till they give us the information of such reason, we have no occasion further to discuss the subject with them.

The circumstance of closing doors, or the

exclusion, mainly, of such as are not members of our Church, has often been objected to class meetings. This objection evidently mistakes the special character and chief purposes of the institution. We have before explained that it is a measure of Church oversight—of pastoral and disciplinary provisions. It is for the ascertainment of suitableness for membership in those that apply for it, and in those that wish to continue in communion with us. It is for the ascertainment of the spiritual state or wants of the members, so that the duties of the pastoral office may be properly discharged toward them. It is for the ascertainment of such cases as require an application of discipline in their correction or exclusion. Now, what right have either the members of other Churches or those who are not members of any, to these provisions and offices of our Church? Plainly, none at all. Those who apply for membership in other Churches have no more right to the examinations and trainings of our class meetings in order to membership, than those applying to us have a right to the catechetic instructions or to the examinations and advices of a session in other Churches in order to membership; and the members of other Churches are no more entitled to the provisions of our special

measure of Church oversight, of pastoral and disciplinary offices, than ours are so entitled to those of others. These matters are very plain; and they are a sufficient reply to the objection. I know of no reason, either of obligation or expediency, why we should make any change in this matter. Certain it is, that if they were thrown freely open to all, and the privilege of attendance were generally embraced, their whole character would soon be changed, and they would utterly fail to accomplish the special objects of their institution.

Some object to class meetings as affording temptations to false professions in religion. I know not any reason for this objection. Sure it is, there is nothing in the institution itself, nor in the character of its exercises, that either tempts or prompts to hypocrisy. There is no where a more entire absence of rivalship or of improper emulation as to who shall be greatest or best. It is possible that persons may make false professions in stating their religious experience in class. But this is equally possible in any instances of personal conversation upon the same subject; equally possible in any conference meetings where religious experience is the theme of conversation; equally possible when a pastor shall visit the members of his

pastoral care, and commune with them upon their state in grace and their manner of life. But what now? Shall all this be given up, all these duties neglected, all these privileges surrendered, because, possibly, some may be guilty of false professions in religion. The reader will answer, No. Very well. And no more ought we, or will we, give up, upon this ground, the duties and privileges of class meetings. Here all modes and measures of Christian profession stand upon the same footing. The defense of class meetings is, therefore, as good as that of others. This is all that now concerns us.

Some object to attend class, alleging, as their reason, an embarrassment to speak in them. This embarrassment may be greatly obviated or removed through the manner of speaking to such. They may and ought to be so met in class, so conversed with there, as greatly, if not entirely, to free them from this hinderance. Therefore, let such cases be particularly communicated to the leader, and let him accommodate his manner to them. Instead of requiring such persons to speak in the more formal mode—concerning which more hereafter—let him address to them a few simple, plain questions in order, and receive their answers, so as

thereby to acquire information of their state. It seems to me that the most diffident could, in this way, engage in the exercises of the class with but little or no embarrassment. And, further, use will accomplish much for such. If they would but command the resolution to engage in these exercises, embarrassment would soon be thrown off. Unfortunately, some take another course. They confess to themselves that they can not speak, and they are thereby robbed of the little strength or courage they had: and now their embarrassment or timidity will constantly increase. This should not be so. All such should cultivate a sense of duty upon this subject, and a determined resolution to its performance. It is a plain injunction of Scripture, that we be always ready to give to every man that asketh a reason of the hope that is within us, with meekness and fear. Now, if such is our duty, we ought earnestly to try to maintain a preparation for its performance; for Christians are ever liable to be inquired of upon this subject. Surely, then, if they should be thus ready to answer any and every one, they should not deem it an oppressive burden to speak in the circle of their classmates, with whom they are united in Christian sympathies and brotherly love. Though it be

done with meekness and fear, yet perform this important Christian duty. Indeed, this is the spirit in which it should be performed. A spirit of timidity that leads to the neglect of duty should be studiously avoided—earnestly resisted and overcome. How many have confessed Christ unto the death! Surely, then, we should be ready to confess him, and to converse upon our religious state in the class-room.

Others object to attending, urging, as a reason, that the exercises of the class are not profitable to them. It may be fairly presumed that, in most cases, this is for the want of a sufficient, or of a proper, unprejudiced trial. In all such cases the fault is with the person making the objection, and not with the institution objected to. But even suppose that some few do not derive, upon fair trial, any personal profit from them. This can not be considered a sufficient reason to disregard a general usage which has been found greatly useful to the Church throughout the whole period of her history. Moreover, it must be remembered that the primary design of this institution is not as a mean of grace, but for the ascertainment of the Christian character of the several members, with a view to timely and proper instruction and encouragement, to the

due performance of pastoral and disciplinary offices. So that were it true, even in many instances, that class meetings were not directly and personally profitable, as a mean of grace, yet answering well, as they do, the other great and important designs of their institution, there is, in this, a sufficient reason, both for requiring attendance and for obedience to the requisition, upon the part of all who claim and enjoy the privileges of our communion.

I will not pass from this point without a practical, admonitory thought. Those who do not find class meetings profitable, or congenial to their religious feelings, would do well carefully to examine into their spiritual state. Much, I know, is to be allowed to the prejudices of education. Yet the exercises of the class are so consonant to a true gracious state; they afford so happily the privileges of that expression of our religious feelings, and of that Christian communion, which fervent religious affections so spontaneously seek, that they can scarcely fail to be pleasant and profitable to all true Christians who properly engage in them. The more extended our observation may be, the more fully will we be persuaded of the truth of what has just been said.

Others object to class meetings, not as a religious privilege, but as a Church requisite. Such are willing that the institution should remain, but would have attendance a matter of mere option, and not of requirement. This is a specious objection, and there is danger of its gaining too much favor. If, however, it is urged upon the ground of a want of lawfulness, or obligation in the institution, we need add nothing here. It is enough to refer to the chapters where that subject is sufficiently discussed. The matter, then, turns upon the question of expediency. Would it add to the usefulness of the institution if this modification were made? In this view we think the reply not difficult. Indeed, if the objection is put in its true light it will scarcely demand any reply. For here we must say again, the objection proceeds upon a mistaken notion of the chief character and design of the institution. And the proposed modification would radically change its whole character, and render it utterly inefficient for the achievement of its great and important ends. Upon what condition of things did the necessity for it rest? Against what condition of things did it provide? We have already seen, and it is necessary here only to recur to them. That condition of things upon

which the necessity for them rested was this: More or less of the Methodist societies, because of the ordinary influences in such cases; because of the temptations and remaining force of evil habits, and the irreligious associations of life, were found to be declining or discouraged, fainting or weary, halting or turning aside from the ways of true religion. Some were so turned aside as to be an infection to others, and a scandal to the cause of Christ. Yet these were placed so far beyond the watch-care of the societies and a sufficient pastoral oversight, that neither aid nor correction could be timely rendered. And it was against these evils that the institution of class meetings was intended to provide. Now, the necessity for them remains in the very same condition of things. And against the very same evils they are still intended to provide. Now, then, suppose the proposed modification to be made, and that it is entirely at the choice of each and all whether they will attend or not. And now who will attend them? Why, those who are devoted and happy in religion, and those who are in good earnest for their soul's salvation. But the great body of the rest—the indifferent and delinquent, the discouraged and fainting, the wayward and wandering—will not attend.

And yet it is because of their condition, and specially for their sake, that the institution exists. Do we not see, then, that with such a change the institution would lose its true character and intent, and utterly fail to accomplish the special, important purposes for which it exists? The main reasons and arguments, therefore, which come to the defense and support of this institution, whether from its necessity or utility, or whether from its character as a measure of godly oversight and watch-care, or of pastoral and disciplinary provisions and offices, do most fairly and fully come to its defense and support in its present position as a Church requisite.

SECTION II.

PRUDENCE REQUISITE IN THE APPLICATION OF THE RULE WHICH ENJOINS EXCLUSION FOR NON-ATTENDANCE OF CLASS.

The duty of Church membership is a high and sacred obligation. And it involves rights and interests correspondingly great. Persons, therefore, should not be hastily, or without sufficient reason, either refused or excluded from the privileges of membership. This is specially the case in the application of a rule concerning prudential matters. Here, especially, there should be due forbearance toward delinquents,

and earnest, continued efforts to reclaim and save them. And it seems plain to me that if any other course is taken in the enforcement of the rule in the instance of class meetings, it will not only be contrary to what is allowable in such a case, but especially contrary to the spirit and intent of the rule which is to be our guide. It is proper here briefly to consider this rule.

And, first, it is fully in character with the doctrine before set forth, that class meetings are, with us, a merely-prudential regulation, and not of divine appointment and injunction. The term of the rule which expresses the penalty for non-attendance is "exclusion," and not expulsion. This shows sufficiently that this offense is not classed with immoralities, where it would be classed if this institution were placed upon the footing of a divine ordinance. If an immorality, expulsion would, according to our code of spiritual penalties, be the term to express the penalty in this instance. Further, in regard to delinquents in this case who can not be reclaimed, it is enjoined in the rule, "Let them be laid aside, and let the preacher show that they are excluded for a breach of our rules, and not for immoral conduct." Here the penalty is, "laid aside," not expulsion; and

it is to be distinctly noted as an exclusion for a breach of rules, and not for immoral conduct. All this is as it should be. Nor should this character of the rule ever be overlooked. And it should never be assumed nor admitted, that class meetings are a term of membership in the same sense with the ordinances of religion, which are of divine institution. These remarks are made, not at all to weaken the obligation of class meetings, but to keep them, as every thing should be, in their own true position.

Further, the rule, in this case, inculcates due forbearance. Those who become liable to be proceeded against are such as "*willfully and repeatedly* neglect to meet their class." At this stage they must, if practicable, be visited by the pastor—it being, of course, understood that the leader has already visited them, and advised, admonished, or reproved them. For it is made his duty to report such as walk disorderly and *will not be reproved*—plainly implying that he shall have administered the reproof before he reports them. Being reported, after all this, the pastor is to visit them and explain the consequence, if they *continue to neglect*. After this, if they do not amend, the rule must be applied in their exclusion. Now, it must be plain, even to the eye of a super-

ficial observer, that here is provision for due forbearance in the enforcement of this rule. These things are no reason, whatever, for an over delay, much less for an utter neglect, in the application of this rule. Yet a reasonable forbearance is due in such cases of disorder, and should be rendered in conformity with the rule.

Again: earnest and continued efforts should be made for the reclamation of such as are guilty of a breach of this rule. A reference to the rule itself will show that this is provided for and required. Indeed, forbearance and efforts for the reclamation of offenders, and, especially, if there be any signs of penitence and reformation, are always a duty, unless in some cases of a peculiarly-aggravated or scandalous character. Here it is needful that discipline should be more speedily enforced. But especially in the case of a breach of rules of a prudential character, and when no immorality may be alleged, special pains should be taken to bring the delinquent to better views, and to a compliance with the requisitions and usages of the Church.

When it becomes necessary to proceed with regular forms of trial against members for a breach of this rule; and where there are, also,

just grounds of charge for the neglect of great and vital duties of religion, such as are contained in the general rules, non-attendance of class should not alone be made the ground of charge. For this course might seem to indicate that we hold the duty of attending class above the moral duties and divinely-instituted ordinances of religion. This should not be done. No occasion should be allowed for any such wrong inference. And yet there is sometimes a temptation to this. It may often be difficult to collect evidence and establish a charge for other cases of delinquency with which a member may seem properly to be chargeable, while, at the same time, it would be easy to prefer and sustain the charge of a willful and repeated neglect of class. Let not this temptation be yielded to. It is a very extreme case that would at all justify such a course.

And yet we must ever hold non-attendance of class as a sufficient ground of charge in itself. And while it should not take the place of others, yet if it exist in connection with others, it should still occupy its own proper place, and constitute a ground of charge in connection with them; for if other grounds of charge were allowed to supersede or exclude this, it

would be so rarely enforced that it would lose all its sanction as a law of the Church: because instances will be extremely rare where this will exist as the only sufficient ground of charge against a member. It scarcely may be supposed that any person desiring a membership with us, who enjoys some measure of religion, or who is, in some good degree, in earnest for his soul's salvation, will refuse a compliance with the requisition to attend class. Such would be the conclusion were we to reason upon the subject. And this conclusion would be supported by the results of the most extended observation. Both classes of delinquency, then, must have their proper place. This must not supersede others, nor must others exclude this. Thus we shall guard against wrong inferences, and secure more fully the moral force of our measures of discipline.

CHAPTER VI.

BENEFITS OF CLASS MEETINGS

SECTION I.

USEFUL TRAINING FOR THE YOUNG AND INEXPERIENCED.

WE have already seen that the primary and chief design of class meetings, is the ascertainment of the religious state and deportment of the members of the Church, with a view to the proper performance of pastoral and disciplinary offices. They are not, therefore, instituted solely as direct helps to the promotion of experimental and practical religion. We mean not by this, however, that they are of little advantage as such helps. We believe that in this view they are of incalculable value. And when we connect these and those, which particularly relate to Methodism, with the benefits which pertain directly to the primary design of the institution, we find them such in number and character as very greatly to commend our class meetings. Yet we do not deem it important to treat elaborately this part of our subject; for we have aimed to pursue, throughout, such a plan of discussion as would constantly ex-

hibit these benefits. We wish, however, here to group them into a more connected and distinct view.

Class meetings furnish suitable and efficient training for the young and the inexperienced. Many such must be enrolled in the Church. And the more fully she accomplishes the ends of her divine mission, the greater number of both classes will be brought within her pale. The Gospel provides for all. It is adapted to all. And it is the mission of the Church to preach it to all, and, so far as she can, to disciple and baptize all, to bring them into her privileges, to throw around and over them her watch-care and protection, to instruct them in the ways of religion, and to train them up for heaven. She must, then, in pursuance of her mission, gather in many of the young and the inexperienced. ¶ Not only the young who have been trained in the nurture and fear of the Lord, whose parents have imbued their hearts with a love for religion, and stored their minds with the principles and precepts of the Gospel, or those who have been favored with all the privileges of Sabbath school instruction, but those also who have been destitute of religious instruction and example must be brought into the Church. And those of a more mature age,

who have lived in ignorance of religion, whose lives have been irregular and vicious, as well as those whose lives and habits have, in the main, been upright, must be brought in. Such is plainly the mission of the Church to all classes, characters, and conditions of society. Many, therefore, of those brought into the Church will, on account of their youth and inexperience, require special training in order to their steadfastness and progress in religion. The children of a family shall as soon be orderly and obedient without parental government; the pupils of a school shall as soon make rapid progress in knowledge without suitable instruction; the fresh volunteers in their country's cause shall as soon form a well-disciplined army without proper drill; the vine shall as soon spring forth and spread its branches in luxuriance and fruitfulness upon the unfenced, uncultured, and barren hill, as such shall, without suitable training, abound and mature in the graces and practices of a true Christian life. Now, for the proper training of these, every Church should sufficiently provide. Indeed, there are few, very few, brought into the Church, whatever their age, or religious education, or habits of life, who do not need suitable training in order to success in the Christian

enterprise; for here all are inexperienced in the beginning—inexperienced in the oppositions and temptations to be encountered—inexperienced in the means of grace and the practices of religion—inexperienced in watchfulness and prayer—inexperienced in the trials and triumphs of faith.

Now, class meetings provide, in a very appropriate and efficient manner, just such training as all such cases require. Here they are placed at once under the vigilant, maternal watch-care of the Church; they are brought into the immediate communion of well-instructed, experienced, and established Christians; they acquire very much of the most valuable information from the details of such as to the experience and habits of their religious life; as to their temptations and trials, and their gracious deliverances and triumphs, through faith and prayer. Such, too, derive great advantage from their direct intercourse with the leader. He inquires particularly into their state and progress. He ascertains their hinderances, the weights that impede their progress, the influences that tend to turn them aside, their weaknesses and besetments. Then he gives them such instruction as their various characters or conditions require. And this is

done, not only once, but frequently; once a week, at least, the privilege of this help is afforded. And thus, by this continued and appropriate culture, the young and the inexperienced receive a suitable and successful religious training; their experience is deepened and developed; they learn to attend faithfully upon the ordinances of religion; they learn to be steadfast and unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord. Here, then, in our class meetings we have an institution well adapted to this great work—the proper training of the young and inexperienced in the knowledge and love of God. And herein is one of their many great benefits.

SECTION II.

CHRISTIAN COMMUNION AND SELF-EXAMINATION.

Class meetings afford the privileges of Christian communion in a mode peculiarly interesting and profitable. This is a great benefit. All need it, and but few would continue long without it. Communion with the people of God supplies constant encouragement and support. It is sunshine to the soul; it is life, and strength, and hope to the spirit. Encouraged and sustained, blessed and cheered with its

sympathies and smiles, its comforts and helps, many urge on their course to heaven, who, left to themselves to journey alone, would weary, and faint by the way.

This Christian communion was a great lack of the Church in Mr. Wesley's day, particularly of the Church of England, to which he belonged. And this lack he happily supplied for the Methodist societies in the institution of class meetings. The want of this communion he thus sets forth in his reply to the charge that he was making a schism in the Church, and breaking up Christian fellowship, by forming societies, in part, of persons who were members of the National Church.

"If it be said, 'But there are some true Christians in the parish, and you destroy Christian fellowship between these and them,' I answer, That which never existed can not be destroyed. But the fellowship you speak of never existed. Therefore, it can not be destroyed. Which of those true Christians had any such fellowship with these? Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised and exhorted them from time to time? Who prayed with them and for them, as they had need? This, and this alone, is Christian fellowship; but, alas!

where is it to be found? Look east or west, or north or south; name what parish you please; is this Christian fellowship there? Rather, are not the bulk of the parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian connection is there between them? What intercourse in spiritual things? What bearing of one another's burdens? What a mere jest is it, then, to talk so gravely of destroying what never was! The real truth is just the reverse of this: we introduce Christian fellowship where it was utterly destroyed. And the fruits of it have been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work."

Again: of the intimacy and advantages of Christian fellowship, secured through the institution of class meetings, he thus speaks:

"It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped from this little prudential regulation. Many now happily experience that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to 'bear one another's burdens,' and naturally to 'care for each other.' As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for, each other. And, 'speaking the truth in love, they grew up into him in all things, who is the head, even Christ; from

whom the whole body, fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplied, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, increased unto the edifying itself in love.'"

The benefits of Christian association depend very much upon its intimacy. It is not meeting in the same congregation, nor waiting upon the same ministry, nor even kneeling at the same altar, that constitutes proper Christian fellowship. Church members may meet thus, and yet have but little of "the communion of saints." He knows but little of the feelings of Church members who will not accord to the truth of this statement. He who is accustomed to meet and converse with members generally will find that many have with the Church—even with that to which they belong—but little proper Christian communion. And this is particularly true as to the ordinary modes of association for religious worship. Nor is this always, nor generally, perhaps, because they are not in attendance upon the public services of religion, but because they are, to so great an extent, strangers to those who meet with them in these services. For the want of a proper acquaintance with those with whom we worship, there can be but little of that commingling of

soul with soul which is the very spirit and life of Christian communion. Hence, many worshipers feel alone in the midst of crowded assemblies. Many seem to themselves to journey quite alone in the way to Zion; not because others do not journey thither, but because they do not fall in company with them. And this is often one of the greatest hinderances to perseverance and progress in the journey of Christian life. Here many stumble and fall. Without that intimacy and sympathy of Christian communion which they have reason to expect, and which, indeed, their circumstances require, they become discouraged and are turned aside, or faint and perish by the way.

Here, then, in the institution of class meetings, there is, at least to a great extent, a remedy for these evils. Here is a measure of intimate Christian fellowship. Every member is, or may be, at least, brought into close communion with the members of his own class. He realizes the communion of the class-room. He finds that here the disciples of Christ are one, and have fellowship one with another; that they mutually love and care for each other; that they have one heart, one hope, one aim; that here spirit sympathizes with spirit, heart beats to heart, soul commingles with soul.

Here is the true principle of Christian association. Through this measure its efficiency and good fruits are very fully secured. Here is realized that intimacy of communion which, as we saw in the first chapter of this work, Christians have often sought as a duty and enjoyed as their highest privilege. Here they that fear the Lord and think upon his name, speak often one to another, and the Lord hearkens and hears, and makes a remembrance of them before him, and they shall be his when he comes to gather his jewels. Here they "rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep." Here they "comfort themselves together, and edify one another." Here is communion that agrees with the intimacy of relationship subsisting between Christians, as members of the same family of God and brethren in Christ. And this, so far from separating the member of the class from the fellowship of the Church generally, opens up the way for a more extended and intimate communion, so that there is, on both hands, much clear gain. We are brought to fuller advantages of Church fellowship generally. The privileges of the class are all additional. Here is the true principle of religious association. Here is most intimate Christian communion;

and in this, the intimacy of the communion, its great advantages consist.

This much may suffice upon this most interesting point. It might easily be expanded to a volume. The reader may, if he please, recur to the first chapter, where we mainly treated of the same subject. Our limits will not allow any thing further.

Self-examination is indispensable to progress and success in religion. Whatever, therefore, secures or promotes it, is, to the same degree, of advantage. And herein is a great benefit of class meetings. For the want of proper examination, many are turned aside, or go back from Christ, and walk no more with him. There may be no perceptible disposition thus to turn away from God or religion, or to turn again to the ways of sin. No inclinings of such kind may be observed. Yet tendencies to evil operate within us; influences to evil ever bear upon us; cross currents are ever encountered that will imperceptibly turn us aside from our true course. Gradually the strength of our purpose, the fervor of our affections, and the motive energy of our efforts are wasted away. Thus the powers requisite to resist these influences, or, being turned aside, to regain our course, are lost; and then, without

any availing resistance, we are borne away farther and farther from God and religion—from the course that would conduct us to heaven. The only remedy here is in a proper self-examination. Like mariners who navigate perilous seas, abounding in reef and shoal, in counter or cross currents and winds, and who must often take latitude and longitude, so must Christians often carefully examine their place and their course, while voyaging the perilous sea of Christian life. Otherwise, they will perish in the calm, or, driven by the storm, wreck amid the billows or drive upon the breaking rocks and perish forever. But frequent and close self-examination will enable us to avoid these dread consequences. We shall ascertain thereby what we are and where we are. Thus we shall escape the danger, and pursue the course of safety.

Now, the class-room is an invaluable help to this examination. Its very design and the nature of its exercises all directly and effectually tend to this result. The purpose of meeting in the class is the ascertainment of the religious state of the several members. The exercises are to be conducted in accordance with this design. Every member knows this. He repairs thither with his mind and heart

directed to this point. He knows that he will be called upon to give expression to the state of his religious experience and progress. Will he not be led, then, by the circumstances of the case, to examine himself? Most surely he will. Besides, each . will be prompted to this by the statements of others, and will be enabled thereby the better to know and express his own. Many things we properly understand and appreciate only by comparison. Such is often the case in Christian experience. We understand our own religious state the better by a knowledge of that of others, with which we may compare it. And thus, by mingling in the intimate fellowships of the class-room, and expressing and comparing severally their religious experience and state, Christians are mutual helps to each other. Each one acquires that information of his own religious character and condition, which is of incalculable advantage to him.

Many a Christian has realized all this from actual, happy experience. Through the currency of the week, worldly cares and interests have, more or less, intruded upon his soul and engaged his thoughts and feelings. All this has its influence upon the religious state; and did it continue without interruption, religious

enjoyment and fervor would soon be lost and the cause of Christ forsaken. True, the return of the holy Sabbath, with its quietness and sanctity, its public privileges of religion, and the hallowing influences which it tends to diffuse, comes in as a most opportune relief, as a most seasonable aid in turning again the soul to the Savior and to the things of religion. But nothing will serve so well as that which calls the soul directly home to itself. We have seen how efficiently this is done in the class-room—how our religious state and practice, experience and progress, are brought immediately under our most scrutinizing view. And herein is a great benefit of class meetings.

SECTION III.

PRESERVATION FROM DELINQUENCY: RECLAMATION OF THE DELINQUENT.

As a measure of preservation from delinquencies, class meetings are very highly beneficial. However, as this point is somewhat embraced in both of the previous sections of this chapter, we need not much enlarge upon it here.

All of us encounter enough of hinderance or adverse influence to turn us aside from following Christ, or to cause us greatly to decline in

religion. A liability to fault or delinquency pertains to our present state of trial; it enters into the weaknesses and evil tendencies of our nature, and into the trials and temptations that assail us; it is implied in the earnest admonitions and exhortations to avoid such things. Alas! this liability is too often and too sadly realized and exemplified in the experience and conduct of professing Christians. Too often do these things befall members of the Church; not so much the mature, the well instructed and established, as the young and inexperienced, who have been more recently enlisted in the cause of Christ.

Now, class meetings supply such helps, such seasonable instructions, such admonitions and encouragements, as may sufficiently strengthen the soul against these tendencies and influences to evil, or rescue it from them. Nor is the aid here afforded unnecessary; nor does it come too soon. These adverse influences, unless resisted and restrained, constantly increase in number and force, while the soul, left to them, as constantly loses in the strength of its religious feelings and purposes and in its powers of resistance. And thus, without sufficient guards and supports, it is carried away into grievous faults or sad delinquencies. Such has been the

painful experience of many. The remedy here required is something that will awaken and keep awake our attention to the true state and great religious interests of our soul; something that will call into active and vigorous exercise all our powers of protection and support; something that will keep us in the constant, diligent use of all those means whereby we may be steadfast and unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord. And what is better calculated to do all this than our class meetings? Here attention is called directly to these things; not once, but frequently; not at far distant, but rapidly-recurring periods. Here religious feelings are strengthened, purposes and vows are renewed, watchfulness and prayer are encouraged, enjoyments revive, faith and hope increase, love abounds. Thus many proceed from one class meeting to another, as from strength to strength, in their way to Zion. And thus many hold on their journey to the end, who, left without these helps, would weary and faint by the way. Many pursue a direct, uniform, and safe course, who, void of the assistance supplied through this measure, would often diverge from the true course, and wander into forbidden paths, thereby greatly impeding their progress,

and fearfully periling their souls. As means, then, for the preservation of members, particularly the young and inexperienced, from delinquencies in religion, class meetings are a great benefit.

Again: many who have been overtaken in some fault, or who have fallen into delinquencies in religion, and are ready to perish, are graciously restored and saved through the institution of class meetings. All Christians, as we have seen, are liable to declensions and faults, yea, to grievous delinquencies; and many do, to a greater or less degree, fall into these things. This operates a most discouraging influence, especially upon the inexperienced, and such as are of a desponding cast of mind, of whom, indeed, there are many. Such have but little resource or restorative power in themselves. Indeed, many Christians continue in the ways of religion, only as they are supported and guided, encouraged and led on, by others. Once aside from the path, they never return, unless some friend in Christ takes them by the hand and leads them back again. If stumbling to their fall, they never regain their upright position, unless assisted by others. And, in these times of declension or delinquency, such soon conclude that they have lost the confi-

dence and sympathy of the Church; and this persuasion—call it mere prejudice or fancy if you will—is to many the greatest discouragement or hinderance. It is a barrier they can neither surmount nor remove. Its influence is deadly to their religious desires and purposes, and soon wastes all their fervor and motive force. It causes many to languish and decline. It tends strongly to consummate the declensions and delinquencies of many others. Surely, here are evils that demand a remedy—evils against which every Church ought, so far as she can, to provide.

And, now, what better, what so good a remedy for these evils, what so well-adapted and efficient a provision as our class meetings? Here such are looked after. They are watched over and cared for. They have an interest in the Christian sympathies of the leader and of the several members of the class, which, but for this institution, they would not and could not have. The declining and desponding, the wandering and delinquent member knows and feels this. It is made manifest to him in the pains they take to recover and restore him, in the earnest and importuning prayers they offer for him, in the faithful admonitions, and earnest and encouraging exhortations they address

to him. Should he absent himself from class, then he is looked after; inquiry is made into his discouragement or hinderance; the kindness and care of Christian affection and brotherly love earnestly address themselves to the work of his reclamation. His condition is communicated to the pastor, who joins in the effort to restore and save him; and many can record, from their own happy experience, the salutary results of such kind, Christian efforts; and, but for the institution of class meetings, none of these efforts might have been put forth. But for this, his case might have been wholly unknown to the Church, till it was too late to reclaim and save him. In this view, then, class meetings are of incalculable benefit.

SECTION IV.

SUITABLE EXERCISE OF CHRISTIAN GRACES AND TALENTS.

Another great benefit of class meetings is, that they call into an improving exercise and a profitable employment, more or less, the graces and talents of all the members, especially the leaders. Christian graces and talents must be exercised in order to proper growth, and strength, and usefulness. Can you find maturity of piety or well-developed graces where

there is not suitable exercise? Can you find useful talents without such exercise? Surely not. Without this, graces are immature and feeble; talents are buried, and unproductive of good fruit. We know there might, in some instances, be suitable exercise without class meetings. Frequent, often daily, opportunities occur, when we might, with the mouth, make confession unto salvation; when we might engage in religious conversation, and mutually exhort and encourage, strengthen and edify one another. But many things will tend to prevent this, particularly with the great body of Church members. With many the business callings and the associations of life are very unfavorable to it. Many have but little or no religious associations, either at home or in the business occupations of life. Many, therefore, either for the want of favorable opportunities or a proper experience, or because of timidity, will fail of that exercise which they must have in order to growth in grace and progress and usefulness in religion. Nor can they have this exercise in the ordinary or more public services of religious worship. Here most are, by the circumstances, excluded. Active participation in these must be limited to comparatively a few. The graces and talents of the many

must, therefore, remain without that exercise and employment which are both improving and profitable. Thus they fail of great advantages to themselves and of great usefulness to others. Is it not, therefore, most advisable to have some special arrangement, some set time for this work? Should there not be regularly-appointed times when those that fear God may meet together and speak one to another? times when all may participate in the active exercises of the meeting? Thus all would discharge a common duty, and enjoy a common privilege; and thereby the general spirituality of the Church would be promoted, the graces and talents of the members would be improved, and many would become active and useful members of the Church, who, otherwise, would remain quite useless to it.

For all this our class meetings well provide. The humblest and the feeblest member has his place and his privilege with the most distinguished and influential. He is here engaged in exercises which tend greatly to strengthen and improve him. The habit of speaking upon the subject of religion, of giving expression to his religious feelings and purposes, will increase his confidence and decision in the cause of Christ. Here is one of the most common and

familiar laws of our moral nature. To speak of our faith is to secure its increase. To express our Christian confidence is to add much to its strength. To declare our decision for Christ and his cause is more fully to determine and settle that decision. To speak of our comforts and joys is to cause them to well up afresh and to flow forth through all the soul. To give expression to our love to God and our brethren is to kindle its fires anew, and to cause them to glow with heavenly fervors. To proclaim our living hope and heavenly prospect is to increase the light and the joy of the one and the brightness and the cheer of the other. Or are we timid, or feeble, or tempted, or in heaviness, or sorrowful, or discouraged, we almost achieve a redemption from all these by the declaration or confession of them. Now, we fully act upon this principle, we avail ourselves of the advantages of this common, potent law of our moral nature, in the exercises of the class. In this way they are greatly profitable, and especially to those who most need these exercises. None can estimate the improvement of Christian graces secured in this way; and by so much is there a clear gain of improvement, and happiness, and influence to the members, and of usefulness and

prosperity of the Church. There is more than so much clear gain; for, instead of being for all this the less profited or useful in all the various privileges and duties of religion, they are far more profited and useful. It is in this way, then, by having something to do for all the members, by engaging them in such exercises as greatly develop and mature their Christian graces, and greatly increase their influence and usefulness in the Church, that the institution of class meetings is very highly beneficial.

The leaders especially are called to exercises of great spiritual profit to themselves and of great usefulness to the Church. A large class is thus formed of influential, spiritual men, who reap rich and precious fruits for themselves, and render invaluable service to the cause of religion. The duties to which they are called as leaders are peculiarly calculated to deepen and develop their own Christian experience. Having so much to do with the experience of others, it must awaken and maintain a lively interest in their own. While they are comforting and strengthening, exhorting and urging others on to diligence and duty, to devotion and progress, they are constantly rendering the same services to themselves. Many such have waxed strong in the Lord, have become well

versed in the deep things of Christian experience, have acquired vast information of all the ways of experimental and practical religion, and have wielded a far-reaching and useful influence in the Church of God. These things are read and known of all who are familiar with the economy and operations of our Church. Now, who can estimate the gain to the Church, the increase of her moral force, the augmentation of her means and influences for usefulness, from this source alone? In our revivals of religion, these are men of faith and prayer, of active and successful efforts. Through them there is direct, personal access to the members of their several classes. Each leader is concerned that all the members of his own class should share in the gracious work of revival. For this end he earnestly labors; and his position in relation to them gives him an influence that otherwise he could not at all command. Thus many forces and influences are put into efficient operation for good. These are men, too, of great usefulness in seeking out and bringing to the altar such as the Spirit has awakened. And here they are strong in faith and prayer in their behalf. They are well prepared to instruct them in the way of penitence and faith—well prepared to guide them

to the Savior. In a word, it seems plain to us that our great superiority, as a Church, in conducting revivals of religion, is derived mainly from our class meetings.

SECTION V.

RELATIONS OF CLASS MEETINGS TO PASTORAL AND DISCIPLINARY OFFICES.

Class meetings are efficiently subsidiary to the due performance of pastoral duties. We have no room here to enlarge upon the duties of this sacred office. It is agreed, however, that they are many and of the highest obligation and importance. Here is the duty of special, constant oversight and watch-care over the entire membership. The poorest and the most obscure are to be cared for, as well as the more favored and prominent members of society. And this watch-care must be maintained in order to the right performance of various other duties. Instances of destitution and want will often occur; these must be ascertained and relieved. Instances of sickness or family affliction will often occur; such must be cared for and visited, and all possible comfort and relief rendered. There will often be cases of sore temptation and trial, of discouragement and delinquency; such, too, must be visited in the spirit

of Christian kindness, and so instructed and encouraged as to recover them from their hinderances, and set them anew upon the way to Zion.

Now, what are the resources of a pastor, when left to himself for the due rendering of all these services? Suppose his pastoral charge consists of a numerous membership, as is often the case. Suppose, further, that they are scattered abroad through the population of a large city, or over a considerable territory of country, which also often occurs. How, then, can he maintain such information of their various conditions and wants, as to be at all prepared rightly to discharge these duties? Circumstances may be supposed, where a pastor might sufficiently know his members so as properly to perform his duties toward them. If they are few in number, and of a uniform, settled class of society, and brought close together as a distinct, separate community, he might sufficiently know them. But such instances rarely occur. The condition of pastoral charges is more generally as above indicated. Is it not plain, therefore, that some provision should be made for the relief of these disabilities of the pastor? Surely it is. And in many instances some such provision is made.

Now, the provision made in our Church is in the institution of class meetings. As we have before seen, they are a measure of pastoral oversight, so that the wants of the members may be known, and pastoral offices faithfully discharged. And we may here again particularly note their peculiar and efficient adaptation to all these ends. As a measure of pastoral oversight, we know of nothing in any other Church at all to compare with it. If the spiritual wants, and even the temporal necessities, of our members are not known, it is because they will not have them known. And this provision is not only efficient to ascertain, but equally efficient for the relief of the wants of our members. Herein is a great benefit of class meetings.

Again: they are of great benefit as an auxiliary to the proper administration of discipline. No person has a right to Church membership who is not a Christian, or earnestly seeking so to be. It is, hence, made the duty of every Church to reject or to separate from her communion all who are not of such character. If any apply for membership, who are not religious, nor seeking earnestly to be, they should be refused. Or if any insinuate themselves into the Church who are not striving to

work out their soul's salvation; or if, after their union with her, they become immoral or indifferent, they must be separated from her fellowship. Even the branch that bears no fruit, must be taken away. And the tree that bears no fruit, as well as the tree that bears corrupt fruit, must be cut down. Neither must remain to the detriment or scandal of the Church.

How, now, is all this work to be done? Can it be well done without some special provision for the immediate oversight of the members? As a general thing it can not be expected that the pastor can have such immediate and constant oversight of his charge as will enable him to acquire and maintain all the information of the state and deportment of the members severally, as will be requisite for the proper administration of discipline in the reproof, the admonition, and correction of the disorderly, and in the suspension or exclusion of more heinous offenders. He is of himself incompetent to all this by the same disabilities that render him incompetent to all the duties of the pastoral office. Here, too, in some instances, he might sufficiently know all his members. If his charge consisted of a few, and if these were so situated as to bring him into easy association with them, he might generally know

them; but such instances are very rare, particularly in our own Church. The delinquencies of some might be known, but those of many others might be wholly unknown. Cases of gross immorality might come to the knowledge of the Church; but of many cases of serious declensions or delinquencies, or of entire indifference or unfruitfulness, she could know nothing. And such members would often long remain to her reproach or injury, contrary to the will of her divine Founder. Does it not seem necessary, then, that every Church should have some special disciplinary measure—some provision whereby cases of delinquency might be promptly ascertained, and discipline duly administered?

Such a provision we have in the institution of class meetings. This is a chief purpose for which they exist, and one which they well serve. They answered this purpose well, even from the beginning, when they existed as a mere financial arrangement. Here is a measure whereby all the members may be brought under the immediate inspection of the Church. The lives of all are, or may easily be known. Information may easily be furnished, through the leader, to the Church, or to her proper authorities, of all such cases as require the exer-

cise of her discipline. Such a measure must be a great benefit to a Church. It eminently provides for the maintenance of good government. And here again we must say that, in this particular, we know not any other Church so well furnished as our own.

SECTION VI.

RELATIONS OF CLASS MEETINGS TO METHODISM.

The most important of these is their relation to our system of itinerancy. Indeed, that system renders these an indispensable part of our Church economy. We see not how the one can be successfully and usefully maintained without the other. The system of itinerancy, it is true, might continue; for, as to the simple question of its existence, it has no necessary dependence upon class meetings; but what we mean is, without them it would lose its adaptation and success, its efficiency and usefulness. But a partial view of the subject may be sufficient to satisfy any one of this. We have already glanced at the difficulties lying in the way of the proper performance of pastoral and disciplinary duties in the ordinary state of things, even with a settled pastorate. But all these disabilities are very greatly in-

creased by our plan of frequent exchanges from one pastoral charge to another. Consider, now, the position of one of our ministers, in view of these exchanges, and the character of our charges. He is placed, for instance, upon a circuit. The territory embraced in it is new to him. The community is strange. The members of the Church are strangers. He knows not where they live, nor how they live, nor what they require, whether of pastoral service or disciplinary appliance. Each society he visits consists of strangers. The time for his stay at any one place must generally be short. He rarely can visit the members at their homes oftener than once in three or six months. Now, how is he to know their spiritual state, or their manner of life, without our class meetings? With them he has two great advantages; for, in the first place, he may meet them in class himself, and converse with them directly upon these subjects. In the next place, he has free access to the leader, or leaders, who are charged with the constant oversight of them, and whose business it is to report their state and deportment, their condition and wants, to him, as representing and acting for the Church. Now, these are great advantages. And the pastor thus readily acquires the information that is

indispensable to the right performance of his duties. But he passes on to the next appointment, not to return again till two or four weeks. And must there not be some provision of oversight during his absence? Must there not be some one or more whose official duty it shall be to visit the sick, admonish the disorderly, encourage the desponding, reclaim the wandering, and urge all on to diligence and devotion? Surely there must. The good of every society requires it. And without a special appointment of some to these duties they will be greatly neglected. Since, therefore, some provision must be made for the oversight and service of the Church or society, during the absence of the pastor, what better could be made than that furnished in our class meetings? What better arrangement than such a division into classes and the appointment of suitable leaders to the care of them? We are fully persuaded that no Church has furnished a better. Nor can we imagine how a better could be devised.

In many of our stations, particularly those in the larger towns and cities, there is quite an equal necessity for some such provision. Indeed, for some reasons, there is a greater necessity. Introduce a pastor into such a town

or city where all are strangers, and where his pastoral charge is somewhat numerous, and it will take him a year to make their acquaintance, if, indeed, he can do it in that time. And all this while many important pastoral duties must be omitted; many disciplinary appliances must be neglected, because he knows not, and can not know, the instances that require them. But with our arrangement of classes, he may know directly the wants of the society concerning all these matters. The position of the leaders enables them easily to acquire such information. And it is made their duty to acquire and communicate it to the pastor. Even these brief remarks may forcibly suggest the great importance and usefulness of class meetings to Methodism.

Revivals of religion—extensive revivals—are as much a part of Methodism as itinerancy, though not in the same mode. On this account class meetings are of great benefit because of their relation to Methodism. They are, with us, indispensable to the proper care and training of the fruits of these revivals. Frequently one, two, or three hundred, or even more, are gathered into the Church in a brief space of time. And these numbers consist of the young and inexperienced; of those who

have lived in great ignorance of religion, and whose lives have been formed to habits of wickedness. Now, how can a pastor take proper care of all these, and train them in the experience and practice of religion? How can he do this, if they are scattered abroad through a large city, where he might not be able to see and converse with all of them in six months? Or, how can he do it upon a circuit where they may be spread over a considerable territory, and where he must be more or less absent from many of them? The reader will answer that here is more than he can do; that there must be some provision that will bring to him efficient aid. Now, just such is the provision of our class meetings. They bring not only all the leaders, but, in a great measure, all the Church to his aid; for those thus gathered in are distributed into the classes, where they enjoy the watch-care and instruction of the leaders, and where they are also taught and guided by the experience and godly life of the members generally. Here are benefits of class meetings that we can not overestimate.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MODE OF CONDUCTING CLASS MEETINGS.

SECTION I.

MODE OF CONDUCTING THEM IN VIEW OF THEIR DESIGN.

THE greatest facilities for business—the very best instrumentalities for the prosecution of our various callings—are only so far useful as we, in some suitable mode, avail ourselves of them. The best institutions and rules of social or civil life avail nothing or yield no profit, except so far as they are properly applied or duly conformed to. So the institutions of the Church—those which her divine Founder has ordained, and those which she has herself appointed in harmony with the great principles of religion—must be properly conducted and improved in order to the great benefits which they are calculated to afford. It is in this view that we deem the mode of conducting class meetings a subject of great importance. They must be conducted in a manner consonant to their character and design, or they will fail to accomplish the great and good results for which they

are so well calculated. And were they conducted differently from what they are, in many instances, and more in accordance with their true spirit and intent, they would be abundantly more productive of good.

In what mode should class meetings be conducted? In considering this question we must again recur to their design. This, it will be remembered, is the ascertainment of the Christian character of the members, with a view to various pastoral and disciplinary duties, which have before been sufficiently explained. Such being their design, the proper mode of procedure in leading them is at once suggested. It should be such as will enable the leader readily to acquire the requisite information as to the religious state and deportment of the several members. This he is to do in two ways, or by direct, special inquiry upon two points. These are clearly set forth in the duties and directions of leaders, as laid down in the Discipline. The leader must see the members of his class once a week, "to inquire how their souls prosper." Again: "let each leader carefully inquire how every soul of his class prospers; not only how each person observes the outward rules, but how he grows in the knowledge and love of God." These passages, both in themselves,

and from their connection, plainly show that the leader must make special, direct inquiry upon these two points—the state of religious experience and progress, and the external deportment; the internal and external Christian life.

As to the first of these, is there not in the present mode of leading class a great want of specificness, of directness and point? It is but a small thing to ask for the religious state of the member in general terms, without any specification or detail whatever. This general mode might suffice for mature, well-instructed, well-established Christians; but it is not at all suited to the religious state and wants of the body of Church members. For the many, questions should be diversified; interrogations should be made upon the various points of Christian experience. To illustrate, the leader should often inquire of them in some such manner as this: What is the measure of your faith? does it rest in God, through Christ, giving you victory over sin and the world? What is your love to God and his children? does it reach, or is it approximating the measure of the divine command? What is your communion with God? is it intimate and uninterrupted? What is your assurance of present

acceptance with God? have you the joint witness of the Spirit of God, and of your own spirit, that you are his child? What is your power in resisting temptation? What is the measure of your religious enjoyment? What are your tempers? What is your earnestness, what your efforts for continued growth in grace? What is your zeal for the salvation of souls, for the prosperity of the Church, and the promotion of the glory of God? These, and various other points of Christian experience and character, must be made the subject of direct, special inquiry. Without this, or so far as it is neglected, class meetings will fail of their design, and of the great good which they are so eminently calculated to accomplish.

We would not urge, nor intimate, that such course should be taken at every meeting of the class, or often with the mature and established members. Yet this mode should often be pursued with the younger, or less experienced. But are classes thus led? Doubtless in some instances they are; yet we fear that in many, very many, cases they are not. This is greatly to the detriment of the cause of religion among us. Upon this subject we should wake up and take heed to our ways. It is only by leading in the mode that we have indicated, that the

religious state of the members can, in many instances, be ascertained. And where this is not known, the leader is unprepared to render proper service, or instruction, and, consequently, the member must often fail of that assistance which he needs, and which he has a right to expect. Nor can the members feel that mutual interest, or be of that service which they ought to render to each other, without this particular information of each other's religious state. Were classes more generally conducted in this mode, leaders would be vastly more useful to themselves, and to the members committed to their care. There would be more spirituality, more growth in grace, more stability, more maturity of Christian character in the class. I think you will find all this corroborated, if you will read the biographies of those men who have been so eminently useful in this calling; or if you will observe the more useful leaders at the present time. The principle has thus often been exemplified, and the trial will ever prove its usefulness.

In the next place, the leader must make special inquiry into the deportment, or the religious habits of the several members of his class. This is plainly one of the duties of the leader, and one object of the institution of class meet

ings. Various rules of Christian duty are specified, according to which the members are required and expected to walk. And it is made the duty of the leader to ascertain, by proper inquiry, whether they so walk or not. Hence he must carefully inquire, "how each person observes the outward rules"—the general rules of our Church.

Here, too, there should be specification and directness. And it is to be feared that there is greater failure here than on the other point already considered. He who would be a faithful and useful leader, must look to something further than a general question and answer as to the religious state and character of the several members in his class. The Church seeks and expects, through her classes, information as to their manner of life. "It is, therefore, expected of all who continue in" these societies, "that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation" by conformity to the general rules. This obedience to these general rules, as a summary of Christian duty, is deemed a necessary qualification for continuance with us in Church fellowship. It is to be in evidence of Christian character. And it is made the duty of the leader to ascertain whether those under his care render this

obedience; whether they furnish this evidence or not. Hence he must obtain the requisite information, not by general inquiries after their religious state, but by specific inquiries into their religious habits, in view particularly of the various duties contained in the general rules. Here is a wide range, but one well filled up.

In the first place, the leader must seek to know whether the members under his care give evidence of true Christian character by doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind. The evils classed under this first head are numerous and common. Alas! that some of them, at least, should be so common, even in the Church. And doubtless they are only the more so for a want of that thorough, direct dealing that should characterize the exercises of the class. With this, members would either reform or retire from us.

In the next place, he must ascertain whether they give evidence of true Christian character by doing good, by being in every kind merciful, after their power, as they have opportunity, of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men. Here many plain, active duties are set forth, which are indispensable to proper religious character; and the leader must know,

so far as he can, whether these duties are performed. Here, again, there must be something more than mere general inquiry into the religious life of the several members.

Lastly, the desire of salvation is to be evidenced by attending upon all the ordinances of God, such as public worship, the supper of the Lord, family and private prayer, etc. The leader must know whether the members of his class do attend to these duties or not. In order to this, there must be direct, detailed inquiry.

Now, such being the design of class meetings, and such the duties of the leader in pursuance of that design, the proper mode of conducting classes is very clearly indicated. Most plainly it should mainly be a free, familiar, catechetic, conversational mode. Such was the mode observed in their earlier history. Such, it seems to us, is the mode contemplated in the Discipline; and it is only in such a way that the great objects of the institution can be successfully accomplished. The present formal, routine manner—rather a speech-making than a conversational one—should, in most instances, give place to a simple, free conversation with the several members—a conversation turning directly upon the various points of Christian experience and practice. Thus, and thus only,

will the leader become familiar with the religious condition of his members, and be duly prepared to render them that counsel and encouragement which shall be suited to their several states.

SECTION II.

MODE OF CONDUCTING THEM IN ORDER TO THE GREATEST GOOD.

Great advantages would be derived from conducting classes in the manner considered in the previous section. The classes thus met, the exercises thus conducted, would be more thorough, and better accomplish the objects for which they were instituted. It is possible to lead class, in the general, formal mode now so much practiced, even for months, without knowing whether the members are really in the enjoyment of religion or not; whether or not they have the assurance of their acceptance with God; whether or not they are faithful in performing the duties of religion, and in improving the means of grace. Such instances have occurred. This could not well be if the mode we have attempted to set forth—that furnished, indeed, in our Discipline—were followed. Besides, the direct, spiritual, and practical influence upon the members would be

greatly increased. Their minds, so frequently and so directly called to the subject of experimental and practical religion, would be more constantly and deeply impressed with its importance.

Why is it, let me ask my brethren in the ministry, that we address our members and receive their replies so differently in our pastoral visitations from what we do in class? and which, upon reflection or comparison, do we decide to be the better? By which do we bring the subject of religion more directly and practically home to them? By which do we more readily ascertain their Christian state and life? Surely, by the more simple, direct, conversational mode pursued in pastoral visitation. We find thus a more ready and free access to their state in grace and to their religious habits, and more effectually interest them upon the subject. And whom do we meet, of all the members we visit, that we can not, in this mode, engage in conversation and in communicating to us their religious state? And thus we think it would be if members were more generally addressed in class according to the true intent and character of the institution. Might we not, in this way, very much improve?

Various inconveniences of a serious char-

acter would be obviated if the mode which we have indicated were more generally observed in conducting the exercises of the class; and great advantages would hereby be secured.

In the first place, it would not be so difficult to provide suitable leaders. This all our ministers, having pastoral charge, know to be difficult. And no wonder! The present mode of leading class profitably requires no ordinary talents. It demands very considerable information, and much readiness and versatility of address. It is easier to discourse on a general subject for an hour than to respond, in the present mode, appropriately and with sufficient variety to twelve or fifteen members; and the response is only the more difficult where all the members are much in the same state, or, what is more usual, speak much in the same way. Few men are competent to lead class in this way with due profit or sufficient interest; and the disability is greatly increased by the inappropriate and uncalled-for mode of replying alike to all the members, and often with the most interest and earnestness to those in the best and happiest religious state, thus overlooking the most excellent direction of the Discipline, "to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, *as occasion may require*." Beside, with

the present manner of leading class, it is a prerequisite in a leader that he be a good, spirit moving singer. He must add this rare qualification to the other extraordinary abilities requisite for his work. If Mr. Wesley intended classes to be met in the present mode, he certainly erred in supposing that one member in every twelve would be suitable for a leader. But if the present mode were changed, and classes were met in a manner according with their true intent and character, this difficulty would be mainly, if not wholly, obviated. Many now considered incompetent would be found most fully qualified for this high trust.

One of the greatest embarrassments to attending class, especially with the diffident and inexperienced, is the present formal mode of speaking. Many such find it a great, almost an insupportable cross. Many, for this reason, absent themselves, if not wholly, yet frequently. But could this embarrassment exist and operate so discouragingly, if the more appropriate, catechetic form, the more simple, conversational manner were pursued? Surely not. Who is there, however timid or unaccustomed to formal speaking, that could not or would not respond to the questions thus addressed, or engage, with but little or no embarrassment, in a famil-

iar, free conversation upon his religious life? And here we think there would be great gain, as the classes would be more fully attended, and the exercises far more profitable to the members.

Classes met in this way would be interesting though but few were present. A few would engage in the exercises with as much interest as many. Hence, there would be no necessity or occasion for the large classes which we now have, often two or three, and, in some instances, four times the number originally proposed. This is a great evil; and yet, with the present mode of conducting classes, it seems a necessary one. We can not reduce the number much for the want of suitable leaders. Nor could the attendance of enough be secured to render the exercises sufficiently interesting. Now, the absence of so many operates a great discouragement to the leader and to those in attendance. Beside, the labors of the leader are vastly increased. How can he attend to the spiritual interests of so many? Especially how can he do this when so many are absent from time to time? There is scarcely one in ten whose leisure or circumstances will allow him rightly and duly to perform this work. But let classes be met according to the Disci-

pline, and these evils may be mainly obviated. There will be no necessity for such large classes in order to provide a sufficient number of leaders or to secure a sufficient attendance to make the exercises interesting. On the one hand, there would be a much greater number suitable for leaders, and on the other a more general attendance would be secured: and thus the discouragements from the many instances of absence, as well as the loss to those who are absent, would, in a great measure, be avoided. The tedium of long classes, which is a great evil, would also be avoided: and the leader, having but few members, and these generally present, could perform more fully and profitably his duty to them in overlooking their spiritual interests.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DUTIES OF LEADERS AND MEMBERS.

SECTION I.

DUTIES OF LEADERS.

OUR limits will allow only a few words upon the subjects of this chapter. Nor is there any occasion for a lengthy discussion; for the main subject, as we have aimed to present it, makes the duties of both leaders and members of classes sufficiently plain.

In the first place, it is the duty of the leader carefully to inquire into the religious state and life of the several members of his class. This duty is specially enjoined in the Discipline. And every leader should feel that this is a great and important work. Nor should any one think his duty performed when he has propounded a general question and received a general answer as to their religious character. His first duty is to know what is their state in grace, and what their manner of life. Nor is he at all prepared to render the various duties that he owes to them, unless he first acquires this knowledge. He must know whether they now

have satisfactory evidence of acceptance with God, and are growing in grace; whether they avoid the evil and practice the good; whether they attend upon the ordinances of God, such as the public worship of God, the supper of the Lord, and family and private prayer.

Next, it is the duty of the leader "to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require." Ascertaining, from time to time, by careful inquiry, the religious state and life of the members, the leader is prepared to render this important service. And it is one he must not fail to render. Otherwise, he will fail of an important duty involved in his sacred trust. And this service must be rendered as occasion may require. It must be varied according to the diversified states of the several members.

There are many and diversified cases upon which advice must be given. Members will often need advice in view of the difficulties and trials that they encounter in the journey of Christian life. They will need advice as to how they must improve the means within their power, in order to growth in grace; also, as to how they shall proceed, in order to overcome the difficulties and obstructions that lie in their way, and make good progress in their journey to the land of promise. This advice must not

be wanting; the leader must ever be ready and prompt to give it.

He must also administer reproof. And here he must not falter in duty, though its performance be arduous. Members often need reproof. And they will bear it, and profit by it when given in the spirit of Christ. They must bear it if they expect to remain with us, or to profit by our fellowship. Then, when they are found to be disorderly in temper, or deportment, let reproof be given; but let it be given in meekness and love. Let the leader reprove, not as a master, but as a father or brother in Christ. "Reproofs of instruction are the way of life."

The leader must comfort his members. Discomforts are numerous. The sources of trial and affliction are many, and Christians are often mourners. Such must be comforted. The bowed-down must be raised up; the spirit, drooping under affliction, must be refreshed; the wounded and crushed heart must be healed; the oil of consolation must be poured into the bosom of the sorrowing; the light and life of hope must be made to shine and glow in the heart of heaviness. What a work for a leader! And how he should rejoice that he may be the minister of comfort to many!

He must also administer the word of exhort-

ation to his members. "Exhort one another daily," is the duty enjoined upon all Christians. So the leader must "exhort with all long-suffering." With many Christians there are times of discouragement—of halting and declension. When they thus halt or decline, or when they become negligent of duty, or the means of grace, then they must be exhorted; earnestly urged on to perseverance, to renewed diligence in duty, and in the use of the means of grace.

Now, all this must be done *as occasion may require*. It was doubtless the intention that these words should be observed as the rule of procedure in the performance of these duties. We must, therefore, recur to, and even urge, the unsuitableness of our present general and uniform mode of response to all the members, without due regard to their various religious states and conditions. And yet this can not be otherwise while the present mode of leading class is pursued. We can not advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require, till our inquiries are so directed as to ascertain what is the religious character and condition of the several members. One impropriety here results from another. And the second can not be avoided till we avoid the first. When this is done—when our questions to the members

are so particular and direct as to elicit due information of their Christian character and state, we shall no longer respond to them as we do now—much in the same way to all. Then we shall speak as occasion may require.

The leader should visit the sick of his class. This, if not specially enjoined as a duty in the Discipline, is, nevertheless, therein implied as such. And it is a duty of special importance. Its obligation or importance may not be lightly esteemed. If it is neglected, it will often be to the great injury of the member, and also to the influence of the leader in his class. He stands much in the relationship of a pastor to it. His acquaintance and association with his members are often more intimate than the pastor's are, or can be. He is with them from year to year. And their number being comparatively small, he becomes intimately acquainted and associated with them. It is very different with the pastor among us, changed, as he is, every one or two years, from one pastoral charge to another, and placed over large societies, consisting of many classes. It is not, therefore, to be wondered at, that members should, in many instances, look first to their leader for visitation or attention in times of sickness, whether of themselves or their families.

Attentions at such times, rendered in the spirit of religion, are grateful indeed, and of most benign influence. But neglect operates with equally ungrateful and adverse influence. Let a member be detained from class or from Church, for some time, by personal or family affliction, and be neglected by the leader, that neglect will be a great discouragement. And the discouragement will only be the greater as the member may be inexperienced or unestablished in religion, or of the poorer class in the Church. Then let the leader faithfully render this important service to the members of his class.

Another duty of the leader is to look after those who absent themselves from class, or who are delinquent or disorderly. This work must be done. And it should, by all means, be done promptly. Most incurable cases become such by a delay of the proper efforts to restore them. Few there are who are delinquent or disorderly, that could not be restored if looked after with due promptness. These wanderings or declinings in religion, are like a descension hurried on by the momentum acquired, and by a constantly-increasing declivity. We must, therefore, attempt to arrest them in the starting, or the opportunity may be passed forever: or we must attempt to remedy them as we

would a malignant disease in its incipient stage. Thus we may succeed. But let this opportunity pass, and the case, but too often, will be without remedy.

Nor should the leader omit, or think lightly of another duty enjoined upon him; that is, "to inform the minister of any that walk disorderly, and will not be reproved." He must visit such as walk disorderly himself and administer reproof. But, then, if they are not cured of their disorderly conduct, he must report them. Otherwise discipline can not, with us, be properly administered. The constitution of our Church is such as to render this impracticable. As a chief executive needs the faithful co-operation of the subordinate officers, so do our ministers, having the pastoral charge, need the faithful co-operation of the leaders. And inasmuch as a judicious and faithful administration of discipline is important to the purity, and moral influence, and growth of a Church, by so much is this duty of the leader important.

It must further be obvious, that the religious character—the internal and external Christian life of the members—will depend much upon the character of the leader, and the manner in which he performs his several duties to his

class. As he is, so will they be. The truth of this, as a general principle, will be affirmed by the results of the most careful observation. Let, then, every leader have an earnest persuasion of the profound responsibilities of his high trust. And let him seek, by all possible diligence, that grace and wisdom whereby he may so perform his duties as to be a blessing to himself and to the Church.

SECTION II.

THE DUTIES OF MEMBERS OF CLASSES.

These duties are correlative to the duties of the leader. I need not, therefore, enlarge upon them, as they may be understood from what has already been said.

As the institution exists among us, and one is placed in charge of the other members, that it may be discerned whether they are working out their salvation or not, it is their duty to give him information of their religious state. He must, in order to such information, inquire into their Christian graces and habits; then they must respond to his inquiries. And all this must be done, not in the spirit of the confessional—a spirit of laic oppression and of priestly arrogance, but in the spirit of brotherly equality and love.

The leader must advise, reprove, exhort, or comfort, as occasion may require, then his members should be ready to receive and improve his instructions. Let them receive his words of advice and reproof, and profit thereby. Let them receive his words of exhortation, and be urged and encouraged on in their Christian career. Let them receive his words of comfort, and be supported and cheered while on their journey home.

It is the duty of the leader to see each member in his class, at least once a week, to inquire into their religious state. Surely, then, it is the duty of the members to attend their class at the regular time and place of meeting. Without this attendance the institution must utterly fail. It could not be required or expected of the leader that he should go round, every week, from house to house, to see the various members of his class. Our leaders are generally men of labor, or business—men who must have business in order to an honest and comfortable living. If they can visit such as are sick, such as absent themselves, or such as are delinquent or disorderly, it is all that can ordinarily be required. True, it is desirable that they should, so far as they can, visit their classes generally. Such a course would have a most salutary

influence. But the class-room is the place specially where they should see their members. And there the members should be in as regular attendance as may be. There will be hinderances, of course—hinderances of business, of sickness, and such like; yet every member should make it a part of his plan—an item in his arrangements, to attend his class. No small inconvenience should hinder him. Uniformity of attendance will be a great blessing to each individual member, and to the whole class. On the other hand, the influence of frequent absences, without sufficient reason, will be most discouraging and detrimental. Such will be the influence upon the member absenting himself, and upon the class generally. One neglect will lead to another, and the member absenting himself will, for every absence, find increased embarrassment and hinderance to attendance. Then let our members, as they are required, and have pledged themselves to do, faithfully attend their classes.

It seems strange to us that so many should suffer themselves to be so easily hindered from attendance. Having united themselves to a Church in which this institution forms so prominent a part, surely they should not trespass upon its order by neglecting this duty. I

repeat it, they pledge themselves not to neglect it. They do this by the act of joining the Church. In so doing they know that this is a rule of the Church, and that they will be required and expected to conform to it; that without this expectation they could not be received. And knowing this, they stand pledged, by the act of joining, to conform to this rule of the Church. Then let them attend their class; let them mingle with their brethren in its intimate fellowships; let them there speak, one with another, in all the freeness of Christian confidence and brotherly-love; let them do this and it will be a great blessing to them, and to the Church.

THE END.

Theol. Library
California
104552

104552

BX
8346
M5
1854 Miley Treatise

THEOLOGY LIBRARY
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT CLAREMONT
CLAREMONT, CALIFORNIA

104552

PRINTED IN U.S.A.